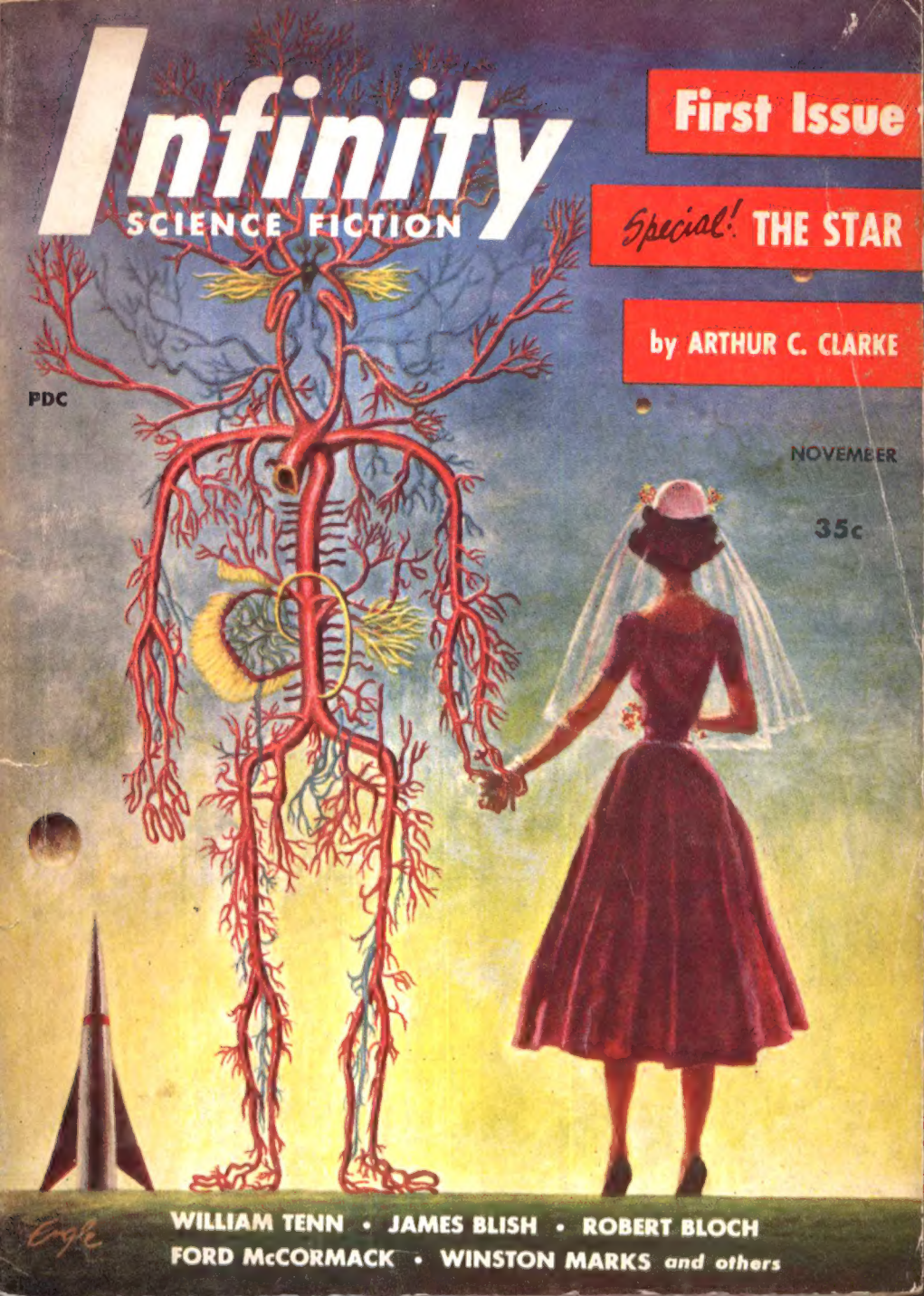
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SCIENCE FICTION
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Infinity

SCIENCE FICTION

NOVEMBER, 1955

Vol. I, No. I

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A Matter of Steps

THIS is the way the world begins: not with a bang but a whimper. . . .

Most science-fiction readers will recognize this quotation in spite of the small liberty I've taken with Mr. Eliot's words—the change from "ends" to "begins." Damon Knight took the title of his often-anthologized *Not With a Bang* from this poem, and other writers have since been bemoaning the fact that he beat them to it.

This doesn't prevent them from quoting the same lines liberally in their own less aptly titled stories. I'm thinking of a particular and rather peculiar type of story now. You know: the one in which the hero stands, fists clenched, and whispers this or a similar sad quotation to himself as the earth crumbles to ashes around his feet. The end of the world is accepted, albeit grudgingly, as an unpleasant event, but it seems that what bothers the writers is something slightly tangential to the central fact. Apparently, if the world ended with a bang, everything would be all right—it wasn't a very "nice" place anyway. But no, it's going to end with a whimper, which makes these writers and their stories awfully wistful and gloomy.

The stories are easy to reject, if only because there have been so many of them, but the philosophy is not as silly as I've tried to make it sound. The world probably will end, as most lives do, with a whimper instead of a bang. Conception, gestation, birth-pangs, growing pains . . . the mills of creation grind achingly slowly.

The same goes for the history of science and invention. Example: science fiction has played with space stations for years now; in hundreds of stories the elephantine monsters have wheeled majestically just above the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Now plans for the first real-life space station have been announced, and it's no elephant at all. It's a Mouse—a "minimum orbital unmanned satellite of Earth," according to the official governmentalese.

The first, er, space station, then, will be smaller than most science-fiction writers have envisioned—smaller and considerably more ephemeral. But don't minimize its importance, for it will be a major step on the road to space. The journey is beginning with a whimper and a stumbling, shaky step, but it is definitely beginning.

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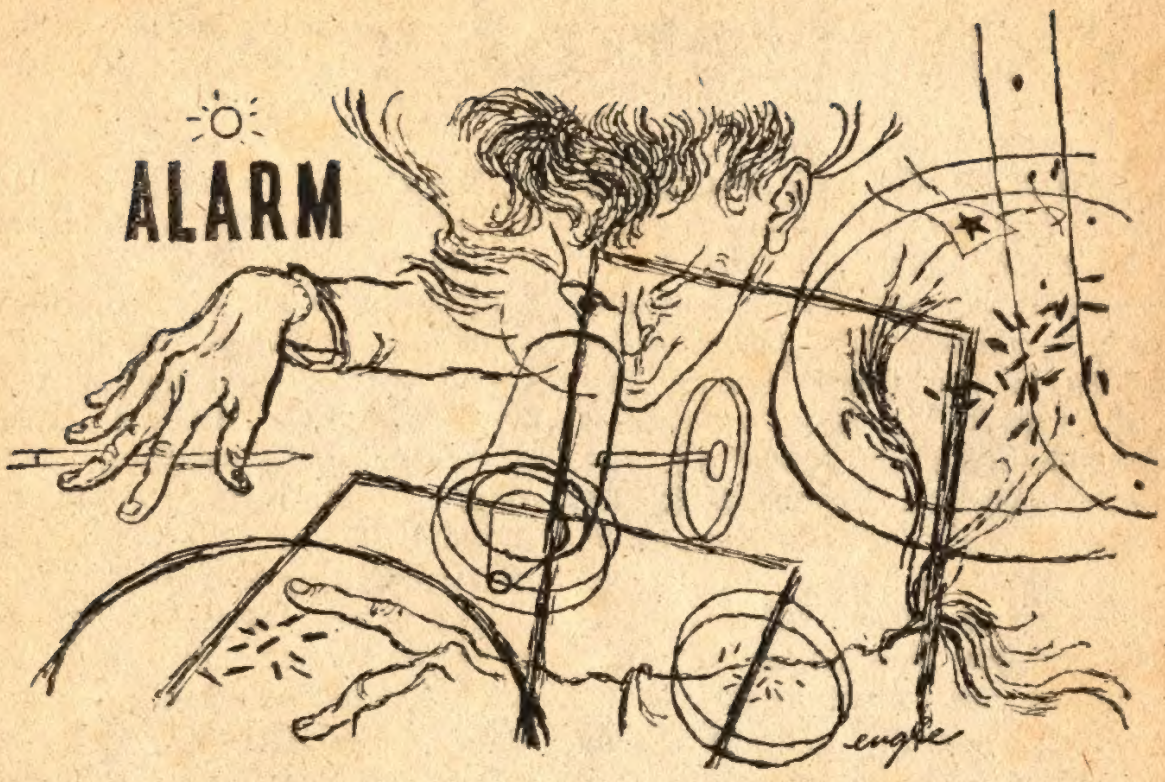


THE SICKNESS

The expedition was Earth's last hope—and its members were victims of an incurable malady!

By WILLIAM TENN

Illustrated by ENGLE

FOR THE RECORD, it was a Russian, Nicolai Belov, who found it and brought it back to the ship. He found it in the course of a routine geological survey he was making some six miles from the ship the day after they landed. For what it might be worth, he was driving a caterpillar jeep at the time, a caterpillar jeep that had been made in Detroit, U.S.A.

He radioed the ship almost immediately. Preston O'Brien, the navigator, was in the control room at the time, as usual, checking his electronic

5CC
10CC
15CC
angle

computers against a dummy return course he had set up. He took the call. Belov, of course, spoke in English; O'Brien in Russian.

"O'Brien," Belov said excitedly, once identification had been established. "Guess what I've found? Martians! A whole city!"

O'Brien snapped the computer relays shut, leaned back in the bucket seat and ran his fingers through his crewcut red hair. They'd had no right to, of course—but somehow they'd all taken it for granted that they were alone on the chilly, dusty, waterless planet. Finding it wasn't so gave him a sudden acute attack of claustrophobia. It was like looking up from his thesis work in an airy, silent college library to find it had filled with talkative freshmen just released from a class in English composition. Or that disagreeable moment at the beginning of the expedition, back in Benares, when he'd come out of a nightmare in which he'd been drifting helplessly by himself in a starless black vacuum to find Kolevitch's powerful right arm hanging down from the bunk above him and the air filled with sounds of thick Slavic snores. It wasn't just that he was jumpy, he'd assured himself; after all, everyone was jumpy . . . these days.

He'd never liked being crowded. Or being taken by surprise. He rubbed his hands together irritably over the equations he'd scribbled a moment before. Of course, come to think of it, if anyone was being crowded, it was the Martians. There was *that.*

O'Brien cleared his throat and asked:

"*Live* Martians?"

"No, of course not. How could you have live Martians in the cupful of atmosphere this planet has left? The only things alive in the place are the usual lichens and maybe a desert flatworm or two, the same as those we found near the ship. The last of the Martians must have died at least a million years ago. But the city's intact, O'Brien, intact and almost untouched!"

For all his ignorance of geology, the navigator was incredulous. "Intact? You mean it hasn't been weathered down to sand in a million years?"

"Not a bit," Belov chortled. "You see it's underground. I saw this big sloping hole and couldn't figure it: it didn't go with the terrain. Also there was a steady breeze blowing out of the hole, keeping the sand from piling up inside. So I nosed the jeep in, rode

downhill for about 50, 60 yards—and there it was, a spacious, empty Martian city, looking like Moscow a thousand, ten thousand years from now. It's beautiful, O'Brien, beautiful!"

"Don't touch anything," O'Brien warned. Moscow! Like Moscow yet!

"You think I'm crazy? I'm just taking a couple of shots with my Rollei. Whatever machinery is operating that blower system is keeping the lights on; it's almost as bright as daylight down here. But what a place! Boulevards like colored spider webs. Houses like—like— Talk about the Valley of the Kings, talk about Harappa! They're nothing, nothing at all to this find. You didn't know I was an amateur archaeologist, did you, O'Brien? Well, I am. And let me tell you, Schliemann would have given his eyes—his eyes! —for this discovery! It's magnificent!"

O'Brien grinned at his enthusiasm. At moments like this you couldn't help feeling that the Russkys were all right, that it would all work out—somehow. "Congratulations," he said. "Take your pictures and get back fast. I'll tell Captain Ghose."

"But listen, O'Brien, that's not all. These people—these Martians—they were like us! They were human!"

"Human? Did you say *human?* Like *us?*"

Belov's delighted laugh irradiated the earphones. "That's exactly the way I felt. Amazing, isn't it? They were human, like us. If anything, even more so. There's a pair of nude statues in the middle of a square that the entrance opens into. Phidias or Praxiteles or Michelangelo wouldn't have been ashamed of those statues, let me tell you. And they were made back in the Pleistocene or Pliocene, when saber-tooth tigers were still prowling the Earth!"

O'BRIEN GRUNTED and switched off. He strolled to the control room porthole, one of the two that the ship boasted, and stared out at the red desert that humped and hillocked itself endlessly, repetitiously, until, at the furthest extremes of vision, it disappeared in a s i f t i n g, sandy mist.

This was Mars. A dead planet. Dead, that is, except for the most primitive forms of vegetable and animal life, forms which could survive on the minute rations of water and air that their bitterly hostile world allotted them. But once there had been men here,

men like himself, and Nicolai Belov. They had had art and science as well as, no doubt, differing philosophies. They had been here once, these men of Mars, and were here no longer. Had they too been set a problem in co-existence—and had they failed to solve it?

Two space-suited figures clumped into sight from under the ship. O'Brien recognized them through their helmet bubbles. The shorter man was Fyodor Guranin, Chief Engineer; the other was Tom Smathers, his First Assistant. They had evidently been going over the rear jets, examining them carefully for any damage incurred on the outward journey. In eight days, the first Terrestrial Expedition to Mars would start home: every bit of equipment had to be functioning at optimum long before that.

Smathers saw O'Brien through the porthole and waved. The navigator waved back. Guranin glanced upwards curiously, hesitated a moment, then waved too. Now O'Brien hesitated. Hell, this was silly! Why not? He waved at Guranin, a long, friendly, rotund wave.

Then he smiled to himself. Ghose should only see them now! The tall captain would be grinning like a lunatic out of his aristocratic, coffee-colored face. Poor guy! He was living on emotional crumbs like these.

And that reminded him. He left the control room and looked in at the galley where Semyon Kolevitch, the Assistant Navigator and Chief Cook, was opening cans in preparation for their lunch. "Any idea where the captain is?" he inquired in Russian.

The man glanced at him coolly, finished the can he was working on, tossed the round flat top into the wall disposer-hole, and then replied with a succinct English "No."

Out in the corridor again, he met Dr. Alvin Schneider on the way to the galley to work out his turn at K.P. "Have you seen Captain Ghose, Doc?"

"He's down in the engine room, waiting to have a conference with Guranin," the chubby little ship's doctor told him. Both men spoke in Russian.

O'Brien nodded and kept going. A few minutes later, he pushed open the engine-room door and came upon Captain Subodh Ghose, late of Benares Polytechnic Institute, Benares, India, examining a large wall chart of the ship's jet system. Despite his youth —like every other man on the

ship, Ghose was under twenty-five—the fantastic responsibilities he was carrying had ground two black holes into the flesh under the captain's eyes. They made him look perpetually strained. Which he was, O'Brien reflected, and no two ways about it.

He gave the captain Belov's message.

"Hm," Ghose said, frowning. "I hope he has enough sense not to—" He broke off sharply as he realized he had spoken in English. "I'm terribly sorry, O'Brien!" he said in Russian, his eyes looking darker than ever. "I've been standing here thinking about Guranin; I must have thought I was talking to him. Excuse me."

"Think nothing of it," O'Brien murmured. "It was my pleasure."

Ghose smiled, then turned it off abruptly. "I better not let it happen again. As I was saying, I hope Belov has enough sense to control his curiosity and not touch anything."

"He said he wouldn't. Don't worry, Captain, Belov is a bright boy. He's like the rest of us; we're all bright boys."

"An operating city like that," the tall Indian brooded. "There might be life there still—he might set off an alarm and start up something unimaginable. For all we know, there might be automatic armament in the place, bombs, anything. Belov could get himself blown up, and us too. There might be enough in that one city to blow up all of Mars."

"Oh, I don't know about that," O'Brien suggested. "I think that's going a little too far. I think you have bombs on the brain, Captain."

Ghose stared at him soberly. "I have, Mr. O'Brien. That's a fact."

O'Brien felt himself blushing. To change the subject, he said: "I'd like to borrow Smathers for a couple of hours. The computers seem to be working fine, but I want to spot-check a couple of circuits, just for the hell of it."

"I'll ask Guranin if he can spare him. You can't use your assistant?"

The navigator grimaced. "Kolevitch isn't half the electronics man that Smathers is. He's a damn good mathematician, but not much more."

Ghose studied him, as if trying to decide whether or not that was the only obstacle. "I suppose so. But that reminds me. I'm going to have to ask you to remain in the ship until we lift for Earth."

"Oh, no, Captain! I'd like

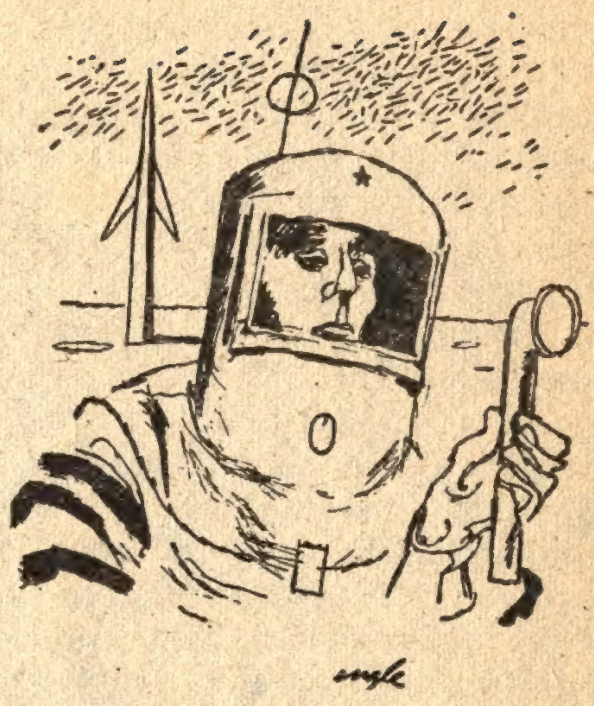
to stretch my legs. And I've as much right as anyone to—to walk the surface of another world." His phraseology made O'Brien a bit self-conscious, but damnit, he reflected, he hadn't come forty million miles just to look at the place through portholes.

"You can stretch your legs inside the ship. You know and I know that walking around in a space-suit is no particularly pleasant exercise. And as for being on the surface of another world, you've already done that, O'Brien, yesterday, in the ceremony where we laid down the marker."

O'Brien glanced past him to the engine room porthole. Through it, he could see the small white pyramid they had planted outside. On each of its three sides was the same message in a different language: English, Russian, Hindustani. *First Terrestrial Expedition to Mars. In the Name of Human Life.*

Cute touch, that. And typically Indian. But pathetic. Like everything else about this expedition, plain pathetic.

"You're too valuable to risk, O'Brien," Ghose was explaining. "We found that out on the way here. No human brain can extemporize suddenly necessary course changes with the speed and accuracy of



those computers. And, since you helped design them, no one can handle those computers as well as you. So my order stands."

"Oh, come now, it's not that bad: you'd always have Kolevitch."

"As *you* remarked just a moment ago, Semyon Kolevitch isn't enough of an electronic technician. If anything went wrong with the computers, we'd have to call in Smathers and use the two of them in tandem—not the most efficient working arrangement there is. And I suspect that Smathers plus Kolevitch still would not quite equal Preston O'Brien. No, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we can't take

chances: you're too close to being indispensable."

"All right," O'Brien said softly. "The order stands. But allow me a small disagreement, Captain. You know and I know that there's only one indispensable man aboard this ship. And it isn't me."

Ghose grunted and turned away. Guranin and Smathers came in, having shed their space suits in the air-lock at the belly of the craft. The captain and the chief engineer had a brief English colloquy, at the end of which, with only the barest resistance, Guranin agreed to lend Smathers to O'Brien.

"But I'll need him back by three at the latest."

"You'll have him," O'Brien promised in Russian and led Smathers out. Behind him, Guranin began to discuss engine repair problems with the captain.

"I'm surprised he didn't make you fill out a requisition for me," Smathers commented. "What the hell does he think I am anyway, a Siberian slave laborer?"

"He's got his own departmental worries, Tom. And for God's sake, talk Russian. Suppose the captain or one of the Ivans overheard you? You want to start trouble at this late date?"

"I wasn't being fancy, Pres. I just forgot."

IT WAS EASY to forget, O'Brien knew. Why in the world hadn't the Indian government been willing to let all seven Americans and seven Russians learn Hindustani so that the expedition could operate under a mutual language, the language of their captain? Although, come to think of it, Ghose's native language was Bengali. . . .

He knew why, though, the Indians had insisted on adding these specific languages to the already difficult curriculum of the expedition's training program. The idea probably was that if the Russians spoke English to each other and to the Americans, while the Americans spoke and replied in Russian, the whole affair might achieve something useful in the ship's microcosm even if it failed in its larger and political macrocosmic objectives. And then, having returned to Earth and left the ship, each of them would continue to spread in his own country the ideas of amity and cooperation for survival acquired on the journey.

Along that line, anyway. It was pretty—and pathetic. But was it any more pathetic than the state of the world at the

present moment? Something had to be done, and done fast. At least the Indians were trying. They didn't just sit up nights with the magic figure *six* dancing horrendous patterns before their eyes: *six, six bombs, six of the latest cobalt bombs and absolutely no more life on Earth.*

It was public knowledge that America had at least nine such bombs stockpiled, that Russia had seven, Britain four, China two, that there were at least five more individual bombs in existence in the armories of five proud and sovereign states. What these bombs could do had been demonstrated conclusively in the new proving grounds that America and Russia used on the dark side of the moon.

Six. Only six bombs could do for the entire planet. Everyone knew that, and knew that if there were a war these bombs would be used, sooner or later, by the side that was going down to defeat, by the side that was looking forward grimly to occupation by the enemy, to war crimes trials for their leader.

And everyone knew that there was going to be a war.

Decade after decade it had held off, but decade after decade it had crept irresistibly closer. It was like a persistent, lingering disease that the patient battles with ever-diminishing strength, staring at his thermometer with despair, hearing his own labored breathing with growing horror, until it finally overwhelms him and kills him. Every crisis was surmounted somehow—and was followed by a slight change for the worse. International conferences followed by new alliances followed by more international conferences, and ever war came closer, closer.

It was almost here now. It had almost come three years ago, over Madagascar, of all places, but a miracle had staved it off. It had almost come last year, over territorial rights to the dark side of the moon, but a super-miracle, in the form of last-minute arbitration by the government of India, had again prevented it. But now the world was definitely on the verge. Two months, six months, a year—it would come. Everyone knew it. Everyone waited for extinction, wondering jerkily, when they had time, why they did no more than wait, why it had to be. But they knew it had to be.

In the midst of this, with both the Soviet Union and the United States of America going ahead full-blast with

rocket research and space travel techniques—to the end that when the time came for the bombs to be delivered, they would be delivered with the maximum efficiency and despatch—in the midst of this, India made her proposal public. Let the two opposing giants co-operate in a venture which both were projecting, and in which each could use the other's knowledge. One had a slight edge in already-achieved space travel, the other was known to have developed a slightly better atomic-powered rocket. Let them pool their resources for an expedition to Mars, under an Indian captain and under Indian auspices, in the name of humanity as a whole. And let the world find out once and for all which side refused to co-operate.

It was impossible to refuse, given the nature of the proposition and the peculiarly perfect timing. So here they were, O'Brien decided; they had made it to Mars and would probably make it back. But, while they might have proven much, they had prevented nothing. The spastic political situation was still the same; the world would still be at war within the year. The men on this ship knew that as well, or better, than anybody.

AS THEY PASSED the air-lock, on the way to the control room, they saw Belov squeezing his way out of his space-suit. He hurried over clumsily, hopping out of the lower section as he came. "What a discovery, eh?" he boomed. "The second day and in the middle of the desert. Wait till you see my pictures!"

"I'll look forward to it," O'Brien told him. "Meanwhile you better run down to the engine room and report to the captain. He's afraid that you might have pressed a button that closed a circuit that started up a machine that will blow up all of Mars right out from under us."

The Russian gave them a wide, slightly gap-toothed smile. "Ghose and his planetary explosions." He patted the top of his head lightly and shook it uneasily from side to side.

"What's the matter?" O'Brien asked.

"A little headache. It started a few seconds ago. I must have spent too much time in that space-suit."

"I just spent twice as much time in a space-suit as you did," Smathers said, poking around abstractedly at the gear that Belov had dropped, "and I don't have a headache.

Maybe we make better heads in America."

"Tom!" O'Brien yelped. "For God's sake!"

Belov's lips had come together in whitening union. Then he shrugged. "Chess, O'Brien? After lunch?"

"Sure. And, if you're interested, I'm willing to walk right into a fried liver. I still insist that black can hold and win."

"It's your funeral," Belov chuckled and went on to the engine room gently massaging his head.

When they were alone in the control room and Smathers had begun to dismantle the computer bank, O'Brien shut the door and said angrily: "That was a damned dangerous, uncalled-for crack you made, Tom! And it was about as funny as a declaration of war!"

"I know. But Belov gets under my skin."

"*Belov?* He's the most decent Russky on board."

The second assistant engineer unscrewed a side panel and squatted down beside it. "To you maybe. But he's always taking a cut at me."

"How?"

"Oh, all sorts of ways. Take this chess business. Whenever I ask him for a game, he says he won't play me unless I accept odds of a queen. And then he laughs—you know, that slimy laugh of his."

"Check that connection at the top," the navigator warned. "Well, look, Tom, Belov is pretty good. He placed seventh in the last Moscow District tournament, playing against a hatful of masters and grandmasters. That's good going in a country where they feel about chess the way we do about baseball and football combined."

"Oh, I know he's good. But I'm not that bad. Not queen odds. A *queen*!"

"Are you sure it isn't something else? You seem to dislike him an awful lot, considering your motivations."

Smathers paused for a moment to examine a tube. "And you," he said without looking up. "You seem to *like* him an awful lot, considering *your* motivations."

On the verge of anger, O'Brien suddenly remembered something and shut up. After all, it could be anyone. It could be Smathers.

Just before they'd left the United States to join the Russians in Benares, they'd had a last, ultra-secret briefing session with Military Intelligence. There had been a review of the delicacy of the

situation they were entering and its dangerous potentialities. On the one hand, it was necessary that the United States not be at all backward about the Indian suggestion, that before the eyes of the world it enter upon this joint scientific expedition with at least as much enthusiasm and cooperativeness as the Russians. On the other, it was equally important, possibly even more important, that the future enemy should not use this pooling of knowledge and skills to gain an advantage that might prove conclusive, like taking over the ship, say, on the return trip, and landing it in Baku instead of Benares.

Therefore, they were told, one among them had received training and a commission in the Military Intelligence Corps of the U. S. Army. His identity would remain a secret until such time as he decided that Russians were about to pull something. Then he would announce himself with a special code sentence and from that time on all Americans on board were to act under his orders and not Ghose's. Failure to do so would be adjudged *prima facie* evidence of treason.

And the code sentence? Preston O'Brien had to grin as he remembered it. It was: "Fort Sumter has been fired upon."

But what happened after one of them stood up and uttered that sentence would not be at all funny. . . .

HE WAS CERTAIN that the Russians had such a man, too. As certain as that Ghose suspected both groups of relying on this kind of insurance, to the serious detriment of the captain's already-difficult sleep.

What kind of a code sentence would the Russians use? "Fort Kronstadt has been fired upon?" No, more likely, "Workers of the world unite!" Yes, no doubt about it, it could get very jolly, if someone made a real wrong move.

The American MI officer could be Smathers. Especially after that last crack of his. O'Brien decided he'd be far better off not replying to it. These days, everyone had to be very careful; and the men in this ship were in a special category.

Although he knew what was eating Smathers. The same thing, in a general sense, that made Belov so eager to play chess with the navigator, a player of a caliber that, back on Earth, wouldn't have been considered worthy to

enter the same tournament with him.

O'Brien had the highest I. Q. on the ship. Nothing special, not one spectacularly above anyone else's. It was just that in a shipful of brilliant young men chosen from the thick cream of their respective nation's scientific *élite,* someone had to have an I.Q. higher than the rest. And that man happened to be Preston O'Brien.

But O'Brien was an American. And everything relative to the preparation for this trip had been worked out in high-level conferences with a degree of diplomatic finagling and behind-the-scenes maneuvering usually associated with the drawing of boundary lines of the greatest strategical significance. So the lowest I.Q. on the ship also had to be an American.

And that was Tom Smathers, second assistant engineer.

Again, nothing very bad, only a point or two below that of the next highest man. And really quite a thumpingly high I.Q. in itself.

But they had all lived together for a long time before the ship lifted from Benares. They had learned a lot about each other, both from personal contact and official records, for how did anyone know what piece of information about a shipmate would ward off disaster in the kind of incredible, unforeseeable crises they might be plunging into?

So Nicolai Belov, who had a talent for chess as natural and as massive as the one Sarah Bernhardt had for the theater, got a special and ever-renewing pleasure out of beating a man who had barely made the college team. And Tom Smathers nursed a constant feeling of inferiority that was ready to grow into adult, belligerent status on any pretext it could find.

It was ridiculous, O'Brien felt. But then, he couldn't know: he had the long end of the stick. It was easy, for *him.*

Ridiculous? As ridiculous as six cobalt bombs. *One, two, three, four, five, six* — and *boom!*

Maybe, he thought, maybe the answer was that they were a ridiculous species. Well. They would soon be gone, gone with the dinosaurs.

And the Martians.

"I CAN'T WAIT to get a look at those pictures Belov took," he told Smathers, trying to change the subject to a neutral, non-argumentative level. "Imagine human beings walking around on this blob of desert, building cities, mak-

ing love, investigating scientific phenomena—a million years ago!"

The second assistant engineer, wrist deep in a tangle of wiring, merely grunted as a sign that he refused to let his imagination get into the bad company that he considered all matters connected with Belov.

O'Brien persisted. "Where did they go—the Martians, I mean? If they were that advanced, that long ago, they must have developed space travel and found some more desirable real estate to live on. Do you think they visited Earth, Tom?"

"Yeah. And they're all buried in Red Square."

You couldn't do anything against that much bad temper, O'Brien decided; he might as well drop it. Smathers was still smarting over Belov's eagerness to play the navigator on even terms.

But all the same, he kept looking forward to the photographs. And when they went down to lunch, in the big room at the center of the ship, that served as combination dormitory, mess hall, recreation room and storage area, the first man he looked for was Belov.

Belov wasn't there.

"He's up in the hospital room with the doctor," Layatinsky, his table-mate, said heavily, gravely. "He doesn't feel well. Schneider's examining him."

"That headache get worse?"

Layatinsky nodded. "A lot worse—and fast. And then he got pains in his joints. Feverish too. Guranin says it sounds like meningitis."

"Ouch!" Living as closely together as they did, something like meningitis would spread through their ranks like ink through a blotter. Although, Guranin was an engineer, not a doctor. What did he know about it, where did he come off making a diagnosis?

And then O'Brien noticed it. The mess-hall was unusually quiet, the men eating with their eyes on their plates as Kolevitch dished out the food—a little sullenly, true, but that was probably because after preparing the meal, he was annoyed at having to serve it, too, since the K.P. for lunch, Dr. Alvin Schneider, had abruptly been called to more pressing business.

But whereas the Americans were merely quiet, the Russians were funereal. Their faces were as set and strained as if they were waiting to be shot. They were all breathing heavily, the kind of slow,

snorting breaths that go with great worry over extremely difficult problems.

Of course. If Belov were really sick, if Belov went out of action, that put them at a serious disadvantage relative to the Americans. It cut their strength almost fifteen per cent. In case of a real razzle between the two groups . . .

Therefore, Guranin's amateur diagnosis should be read as a determined attempt at optimism. Yes, optimism! If it was meningitis and thus highly contagious, others were likely to pick it up, and those others could just as well be Americans as Russians. That way, the imbalance could be redressed.

O'Brien shivered. What kind of lunacy—

But then, he realized, if it had been an American, instead of a Russian, who had been taken real sick and was up there in the hospital at the moment, his mind would have been running along the same track as Guranin's. Meningitis would have seemed like something to hope for desperately.

Captain Ghose climbed down into the mess-hall. His eyes seemed darker and smaller than ever.

"Listen, men. As soon as you've finished eating, report up to the control room which, until further notice, will serve as an annex to the hospital."

"What for, Captain?" someone asked. "What do we report for?"

"Precautionary injections."

There was a silence. Ghose started out of the place. Then the chief engineer cleared his throat.

"How is Belov?"

The captain paused for a moment, without turning around. "We don't know yet. And if you're going to ask me what's the matter with him, we don't know that yet either."

THEY WAITED in a long, silent, thoughtful line outside the control room, entering and leaving it one by one. O'Brien's turn came.

He walked in, baring his right arm, as he had been ordered. At the far end, Ghose was staring out of the porthole as if he were waiting for a relief expedition to arrive. The navigation desk was covered with cotton swabs, beakers filled with alcohol and small bottles of cloudy fluid.

"What's this stuff, Doc?" O'Brien asked when the injection had been completed and he was allowed to roll down his sleeve.

"Duoplexin. The new antibiotic that the Australians de-

veloped last year. Its therapeutic value hasn't been completely validated, but it's the closest thing to a general cure-all that medicine's come up with. I hate to use anything so questionable, but before we lifted from Benares, I was told to shoot you fellows full of it if any off-beat symptoms showed up."

"Guranin says it sounds like meningitis," the navigator suggested.

"It isn't meningitis."

O'Brien waited a moment, but the doctor was filling a new hypodermic and seemed indisposed to comment further. He addressed Ghose's back. "How about those pictures that Belov took? They been developed yet? I'd like to see them."

The captain turned away from the porthole and walked around the control room with his hands clasped behind his back. "All of Belov's gear," he said in a low voice, "is under quarantine in the hospital along with Belov. Those are the doctor's orders."

"Oh. Too bad." O'Brien felt he should leave, but curiosity kept him talking. There was something these men were worried about that was bigger even than the fear niggling the Russians. "He told me over the radio that the Martians had been distinctly humanoid. Amazing, isn't it? Talk about parallel evolution!"

Schneider set the hypodermic down carefully. "Parallel evolution," he muttered. "Parallel evolution and parallel pathology. Although it doesn't seem to act quite like any terrestrial bug. Parallel susceptibility, though. That you could say definitely."

"You mean you think Belov has picked up a *Martian* disease?" O'Brien let the concept careen through his mind. "But that city was so old. No germ could survive anywhere near that long!"

The little doctor thumped his small paunch decisively. "We have no reason to believe it couldn't. Some germs we know of on Earth might be able to. As spores—in any one of a number of ways."

"But if Belov—"

"That's enough," the captain said. "Doctor, you shouldn't think out loud. Keep your mouth shut about this, O'Brien, until we decide to make a general announcement. Next man!" he called.

Tom Smathers came in. "Hey, Doc," he said, "I don't know if this is important, but I've begun to generate the lousiest headache of my entire life."

THE OTHER three men stared at each other. Then Schneider plucked a thermometer out of his breast-pocket and put it into Smathers's mouth, whispering an indistinct curse as he did so. O'Brien took a deep breath and left.

They were all told to assemble in the mess hall-dormitory that night. Schneider, looking tired, mounted a table, wiped his hands on his jumper and said:

"Here it is, men. Nicolai Belov and Tom Smathers are down sick, Belov seriously. The symptoms seem to begin with a mild headache and temperature which rapidly grow worse and, as they do, are accompanied by severe pains in the back and joints. That's the first stage. Smathers is in that right now. Belov—"

Nobody said anything. They sat around in various relaxed positions watching the doctor. Guranin and Layatinsky were looking up from their chess board as if some relatively unimportant comments were being made that, perforce, just had to be treated, for the sake of courtesy, as of more significance than the royal game. But when Guranin shifted his elbow and knocked his king over, neither of them bothered to pick it up.

"Belov," Dr. Alvin Schneider went on after a bit, "Belov is in the second stage. This is characterized by a weirdly fluctuating temperature, delirium, and a substantial loss of coordination—pointing, of course, to an attack on the nervous system. The loss of coordination is so acute as to affect even peristalsis, making intravenous feeding necessary. One of the things we will do tonight is go through a demonstration-lecture of intravenous feeding, so that any of you will be able to take care of the patients. Just in case."

Across the room, O'Brien saw Hopkins, the radio and communications man, make the silent mouth-movement of "Wow!"

"Now as to what they're suffering from. I don't know, and that about sums it up. I'm fairly certain though that it isn't a terrestrial disease, if only because it seems to have one of the shortest incubation periods I've ever encountered as well as a fantastically rapid development. I think it's something that Belov caught in that Martian city and brought back to the ship. I have no idea if it's fatal and to what degree, although it's sound procedure in such a case to expect the worst. The only hope I can hold out at the mo-

ment is that the two men who are down with it exhibited symptoms before I had a chance to fill them full of duoplexin. Everyone else on the ship—including me—has now had a precautionary injection. That's all. Are there any questions?"

There were no questions.

"All right," Dr. Schneider said. "I want to warn you, though I hardly think it's necessary under the circumstances, that any man who experiences any kind of a headache—*any* kind of a headache—is to report immediately for hospitalization and quarantine. We're obviously dealing with something highly infectious. Now if you'll all move in a little closer, I'll demonstrate intravenous feeding on Captain Ghose. Captain, if you please."

He glanced around the room, looking unhappy.

When the demonstration was over and they had proved their proficiency, to his satisfaction, on each other, he put together all the things that smelled pungently of antiseptic and said: "Well, now that's taken care of. We're covered, in case of emergency. Get a good night's sleep."

Then he started out. And stopped. He turned around and looked carefully from man to man. "O'Brien," he said at last. "You come up with me."

Well, at least, the navigator thought, as he followed, at least it's even now. One Russian and one American. If only it stayed that way!

SCHNEIDER GLANCED in at the hospital and nodded to himself. "Smathers," he commented. "He's reached the second stage. Fastest-acting damn bug ever. Probably finds us excellent hosts."

"Any idea what it's like?" O'Brien asked, finding, to his surprise, that he was having trouble catching up to the little doctor.

"Uh-uh. I spent two hours with the microscope this afternoon. Not a sign. I prepared a lot of slides, blood, spinal fluid, sputum, and I've got a shelf of specimen jars all filled up. They'll come in handy for Earthside doctors if ever we—Oh, well. You see, it could be a filterable virus, it could be a bacillus requiring some special stain to make it visible, anything. But the most I was hoping for was to detect it—we'd never have the time to develop a remedy."

He entered the control room, still well ahead of the taller man, stood to one side, and, once the other had come

in, locked the door. O'Brien found his actions puzzling.

"I can't see why you're feeling so hopeless, doc. We have those white mice down below that were intended for testing purposes if Mars turned out to have half an atmosphere after all. Couldn't you use them as experimental animals and try to work up a vaccine?"

The doctor chuckled without turning his lips up into a smile. "In twenty-four hours. Like in the movies. No, and even if I intended to take a whirl at it, which I did, it's out of the question now."

"What do you mean—*now?*"

Schneider sat down carefully and put his medical equipment on the desk beside him. Then he grinned. "Got an aspirin, Pres?"

Automatically, O'Brien's hand went into the pocket of his jumper. "No, but I think that—" Then he understood. A wet towel unrolled in his abdomen. "When did it start?" he inquired softly.

"It must have started near the end of the lecture, but I was too busy to notice it. I first felt it just as I was leaving the mess hall. A real earsplitter at the moment. No, keep away!" he shouted, as O'Brien started forward sympathetically. "This probably won't do any good, but at least keep your distance. Maybe it will give you a little extra time."

"Should I get the captain?"

"If I needed him, I'd have asked him along. I'll be turning myself into the hospital in a few minutes. I'd just wanted to transfer my authority to you."

"Your *authority?* Are you the—the—"

Doctor Alvin Schneider nodded. He went on—in English. "I'm the American Military Intelligence officer. Was, I should say. From now on, you are. Look, Pres, I don't have much time. All I can tell you is this. Assuming that we're not all dead within a week, and assuming that it is decided to attempt a return to Earth with the consequent risk of infecting the entire planet (something which, by the way, I personally would not recommend from where I sit), you are to keep your status as secret as I kept mine, and in the event it becomes necessary to tangle with the Russians, you are to reveal yourself with the code sentence you already know."

"Fort Sumter has been fired upon," O'Brien said slowly. He was still assimilating the fact that Schneider had been

the MI officer. Of course, he had known all along that it could have been anyone of the seven Americans. But Schneider!

"Right. If you then get control of the ship, you are to try to land her at White Sands, California, where we all got our preliminary training. You will explain to the authorities how I came to transfer authority to you. That's about all, except for two things. If you get sick, you'll have to use your own judgment about who to pass the scepter to—I prefer not to go any further than you at the moment. And—I could very easily be wrong—but it's my personal opinion, for whatever it may be worth, that my opposite number among the Russians is Fyodor Guranin."

"Check." And then full realization came to O'Brien. "But, doc, you said you gave yourself a shot of duoplexin. Doesn't that mean—"

Schneider rose and rubbed his forehead with his fist. "I'm afraid it does. That's why this whole ceremony is more than a little meaningless. But I had the responsibility to discharge. I've discharged it. Now, if you will excuse me, I think I'd better lie down. Good luck."

ON HIS WAY to report Schneider's illness to the captain, O'Brien came to realize how the Russians had felt earlier that day. There were now five Americans to six Russians. That could be bad. And the responsibility was his.

But with his hand on the

door to the captain's room, he shrugged. Fat lot of difference it made! As the plump little man had said: *"Assuming that we're not all dead within a week. . . ."*

The fact was that the political set-up on Earth, with all of its implications for two billion people, no longer had very many implications for them. They couldn't risk spreading the disease on Earth, and unless they got back there, they had very little chance of finding a cure for it. They were chained to an alien planet, waiting to be knocked off, one by one, by a sickness which had claimed its last victims a thousand thousand years ago.

Still— He didn't like being a member of a minority.

BY MORNING, he wasn't. During the night, two more Russians had come down with what they were all now referring to as Belov's Disease. That left five Americans to four Russians—except that by that time, they had ceased to count heads in national terms.

Ghose suggested that they change the room serving as mess hall and dormitory into a hospital and that all the healthy men bunk out in the engine room. He also had Guranin rig up a radiation chamber just in front of the engine room.

"All men serving as attendants in the hospital will wear space-suits," he ordered. "Before they re-enter the engine room, they will subject the space-suit to a radiation bath of maximum intensity. Then and only then will they join the rest of us and remove the suit. It's not much, and I think any germ as virulent as this one seems to be won't be stopped by such precautions, but at least we're still making fighting motions."

"Captain," O'Brien inquired. "What about trying to get in touch with Earth some way or other? At least to tell them what's hitting us, for the guidance of future expeditions. I know we don't have a radio transmitter powerful enough to operate at such a distance, but couldn't we work out a rocket device that would carry a message and might have a chance of being picked up?"

"I've thought of that. It would be very difficult, but granted that we could do it, do you have any way of insuring that we wouldn't send the contagion along with the message? And, given the conditions on Earth at the moment, I don't think we have to

worry about the possibility of another expedition if we don't get back. You know as well as I that within eight or nine months at the most—" The captain broke off. "I seem to have a slight headache," he said mildly.

Even the men who had been working hard in the hospital and were now lying down got to their feet at this.

"Are you sure?" Guranin asked him desperately. "Couldn't it just be a—"

"I'm sure. Well, it had to happen, sooner or later. I think you all know your duties in this situation and will work together well enough. And you're each one capable of running the show. So. In case the matter comes up, in case of any issue that involves a command decision, the captain will be that one among you whose last name starts with the lowest letter alphabetically. Try to live in peace —for as much time as you may have left. Good-bye."

He turned and walked out of the engine room and into the hospital, a thin, dark-skinned man on whose head weariness sat like a crown.

BY SUPPER-TIME, that evening, only two men had still not hospitalized themselves: Preston O'Brien and Semyon Kolevitch. They went through the minutiae of intravenous feeding, of cleaning the patients and keeping them comfortable, with dullness and apathy.

It was just a matter of time. And when they were gone, there would be no one to take care of them.

All the same, they performed their work diligently, and carefully irradiated their space-suits before returning to the engine room. When Belov and Smathers entered Stage Three, complete coma, the navigator made a descriptive note of it in Dr. Schneider's medical log, under the column of temperature readings that looked like stock market quotations on a very uncertain day in Wall Street.

They ate supper together in silence. They had never liked each other and being limited to each other's company seemed to deepen that dislike.

After supper, O'Brien watched the Martian moons, Deimos and Phobos, rise and set in the black sky through the engine room porthole. Behind him, Kolevitch read Pushkin until he fell asleep.

The next morning, O'Brien found Kolevitch occupying a bed in the hospital. The assistant navigator was already delirious.

"And then there was one," Preston O'Brien said to himself. "Where do we go from here, boys, where do we go from here?"

As he went about his tasks as orderly, he began talking to himself a lot. What the hell, it was better than nothing. It enabled him to forget that he was the only conscious intellect at large on this red dust-storm of a world. It enabled him to forget that he would shortly be dead. It enabled him, in a rather lunatic way, to stay sane.

Because this was it. This was really it. The ship had been planned for a crew of fifteen men. In an emergency, it could be operated by as few as five. Conceivably, two or three men, running about like crazy and being incredibly ingenious, could take it back to Earth and crash-land it somehow. But one man . . .

Even if his luck held out and he didn't come down with Belov's Disease, he was on Mars for keeps. He was on Mars until his food ran out and his air ran out and the space-ship became a rusting coffin around him. And if he did develop a headache, well, the inevitable end would come so much the faster.

This was it. And there was nothing he could do about it.

HE WANDERED about the ship, suddenly enormous and empty. He had grown up on a ranch in northern Montana, Preston O'Brien had, and he'd never liked being crowded. The back-to-back conditions that space travel made necessary had always irritated him like a pebble in the shoe, but he found this kind of immense, ultimate loneliness almost overpowering. When he took a nap, he found himself dreaming of crowded stands at a World Series baseball game, of the sweating, soggy mob during a subway rush-hour in New York. When he awoke, the loneliness hit him again.

Just to keep himself from going crazy, he set himself little tasks. He wrote a brief history of their expedition for some wholly hypothetical popular magazine; he worked out a dozen or so return courses with the computers in the control room; he went through the Russians' personal belongings to find out—just for curiosity's sake, since it could no longer be of any conceivable importance—who the Soviet MI man had been.

It had been Belov. That surprised him. He had liked Belov very much. Although, he remembered, he had also liked Schneider very much. So

it made some sense, on a high-order planning level, after all.

He found himself, much to his surprise, regretting Kolevitch. Damn it, he should have made some more serious attempt to get close to the man before the end!

They had felt a strong antipathy toward each other from the beginning. On Kolevitch's side it no doubt had s o m e t h i n g to do with O'Brien's being chief navigator when the Russian had good reason to consider himself by far the better mathematician. And O'Brien had found his assistant singularly without humor, exhibiting a kind of sub-surface truculence that somehow never managed to achieve outright insubordination.

Once, when Ghose had reprimanded him for his obvious attitude toward the man, he had exclaimed: "Well, you're right, and I suppose I should be sorry. But I don't feel that way about any of the other Russians. I get along fine with the rest of them. It's only Kolevitch that I'd like to swat and that, I'll admit, is all the time."

The captain had sighed. "Don't you see what that dislike adds up to? You find the Russian crew members to be pretty decent fellows, fairly easy to get along with, and that can't be: you know the Russians are b e a s t s—they should be exterminated to the last man. So all the fears, all the angers and frustrations, you feel you should logically entertain about them, are channeled into a single direction. You make one man the psychological scapegoat for a whole nation, and you pour out on Semyon Kolevitch all the hatred which you would wish to direct against the other Russians, but can't, because, being an intelligent, perceptive person, you find them too likable.

"Everybody h a t e s somebody on this ship. And they all feel they have good reasons. Hopkins hates Layatinsky because he claims he's always snooping around the communications room. Guranin hates Doctor Schneider, why, I'll never know."

"I can't buy that. Kolevitch has gone out of his way to annoy me. I know that for a fact. And what about Smathers? He hates all the Russians. Hates 'em to a man."

"Smathers is a special case. I'm afraid he lacked security to begin with, and his peculiar position on this expedition—low man on the I.Q. pole—hasn't done his ego any good. You could help him, if you

made a particular friend of him. I know he'd like that."

"A-ah," O'Brien had shrugged uncomfortably. "I'm no psychological social worker. I get along all right with him, but I can take Tom Smathers only in very small doses."

And that was another thing he regretted. He'd never been ostentatious about being absolutely indispensable as navigator and the smartest man on board; he'd even been positive he rarely thought about it. But he realized now, against the background glare of his approaching extinction, that almost daily he had smugly plumped out this fact, like a pillow, in the back of his mind. It had been there: it had been nice to stroke. And he had stroked it frequently.

A sort of sickness. Like the sickness of Hopkins-Layatinsky, Guranin-Schneider, Smathers-everyone else. Like the sickness on Earth at the moment, when two of the largest nations on the planet and as such having no need to covet each other's territory, were about ready, reluctantly and unhappily, to go to war with each other, a war which would destroy them both and all other nations besides, allies as well as neutral states, a war which could so easily be avoided and yet was so thoroughly unavoidable.

Maybe, O'Brien thought then, they hadn't caught any sickness on Mars; maybe they'd just brought a sickness —call it the Human Disease— to a nice, clean, sandy planet and it was killing them, because here it had nothing else on which to feed.

O'Brien shook himself.

He'd better watch out. This way madness lay. "Better start talking to myself again. How are you, boy? Feeling all right? No headaches? No aches, no pains, no feelings of fatigue? Then you must be dead, boy!"

WHEN HE WENT through the hospital that afternoon, he noticed that Belov had reached what could be described as Stage Four. Beside Smathers and Ghose who were both still in the coma of Stage Three, the geologist looked wide-awake. His head rolled restlessly from side to side and there was a terrible, absolutely horrifying look in his eyes.

"How are you feeling, Nicolai?" O'Brien asked tentatively.

There was no reply. Instead the head turned slowly and Belov stared directly at him. O'Brien shuddered. That

look was enough to freeze your blood, he decided, as he went into the engine room and got out of his space-suit.

Maybe it wouldn't go any further than this. Maybe you didn't die of Belov's Disease. Schneider had said it attacked the nervous system: so maybe the end-product was just insanity.

"Big deal," O'Brien muttered. "Big, big deal."

He had lunch and strolled over to the engine room porthole. The pyramidal marker they had planted on the first day caught his eye: it was the only thing worth looking at in this swirling, hilly landscape. *First Terrestrial Expedition to Mars. In the Name of Human Life.*

If only Ghose hadn't been in such a hurry to get the marker down. The inscription needed rewriting. *Last Terrestrial Expedition to Mars. In the Memory of Human Life —Here and on Earth.* That would be more apt.

He knew what would happen when the expedition didn't return—and no message arrived from it. The Russians would be positive that the Americans had seized the ship and were using the data obtained on the journey to perfect their bomb-delivery technique. The Americans would be likewise positive that the Russians . . .

They would be the incident.

"Ghose would sure appreciate that," O'Brien said to himself wryly.

There was a clatter behind him. He turned.

The cup and plate from which he'd had lunch were floating in the air!

O'BRIEN SHUT his eyes, then opened them slowly. Yes, no doubt about it, they were floating! They seemed to be performing a slow, lazy dance about each other. Once in a while, they touched gently, as if kissing, then pulled apart. Suddenly, they sank to the table and came to rest like a pair of balloons with a last delicate bounce or two.

Had he got Belov's Disease without knowing it, he wondered? Could you progress right to the last stage—hallucinations—without having headaches or fever?

He heard a series of strange noises in the hospital and ran out of the engine room without bothering to get into his space-suit.

Several blankets were dancing about, just like the cup and saucer. They swirled through the air, as if caught in a strong wind. As he watched, almost sick with

astonishment, a few other objects joined them—a thermometer, a packing case, a pair of pants.

But the crew lay silently in their bunks. Smathers had evidently reached Stage Four too. There was the same restless head motion, the same terrible look whenever his eyes met O'Brien's.

And then, as he turned to Belov's bunk, he saw that it was empty! Had the man gotten up in his delirium and wandered off? Was he feeling better? Where had he gone?

O'Brien began to search the ship methodically, calling the Russian by name. Section by section, compartment by compartment, he came at last to the control room. It too was empty. Then where could Belov be?

As he wandered distractedly around the little place, he happened to glance through the porthole. And there, outside, he saw Belov. Without a space-suit!

IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE—no man could survive for a moment unprotected on the raw, almost airless surface of Mars—yet there was Nicolai Belov walking as unconcernedly as if the sand beneath his feet were the Nevsky Prospekt! And then he shimmered a little around the edges, as if he'd been turned partially into glass—and disappeared.

"Belov!" O'Brien found himself yelping. "For God's sake! Belov! *Belov!*"

"He's gone to inspect the Martian city," a voice said behind him. "He'll be back shortly."

The navigator spun around. There was nobody in the room. He *must* be going completely crazy.

"No, you're not," the voice said. And Tom Smathers rose slowly through the solid floor.

"What's happening to you people?" O'Brien gasped. "What *is* all this?"

"Stage Five of Belov's Disease. The last one. So far, only Belov and I are in it, but the others are entering it now."

O'Brien found his way to a chair and sat down. He worked his mouth a couple of times but couldn't make the words come out.

"You're thinking that Belov's Disease is making magicians out of us," Smathers told him. "No. First, it isn't a disease at all."

For the first time, Smathers looked directly at him and O'Brien had to avert his eyes. It wasn't just that horrifying look he'd had lying on the bed in the hospital. It was—it was as if Smathers were

no longer Smathers. He'd become something else.

"Well, it's caused by a bacillus, but not a parasitical one. A symbiotical one."

"Symbi—"

"Like the intestinal flora, it performs a useful function. A highly useful function." O'Brien had the impression that Smathers was having a hard time finding the right words, that he was choosing very carefully, as if—as if—As if he were talking to a small child!

"That's correct," Smathers told him. "But I believe I can make you understand. The bacillus of Belov's Disease inhabited the nervous system of the ancient Martians as our stomach bacteria live in human digestive systems. Both are symbiotic, both enable the systems they inhabit to function with far greater effectiveness. The Belov bacillus operates within us as a kind of neural transformer, multiplying the mental output almost a thousand times."

"You mean you're a thousand times as intelligent as before?"

Smathers frowned. "This is very difficult. Yes, roughly a thousand times as intelligent, if you must put it that way. Actually, there's a thousandfold increase in mental powers. Intelligence is merely one of those powers. There are many others such as telepathy and telekinesis which previously existed in such minuscule state as to be barely observable. I am in constant communication with Belov, for example, wherever he is. Belov is in almost complete control of his physical environment and its effect on his body. The movable objects which alarmed you so were the results of the first clumsy experiments we made with our new minds. There is still a good deal we have to learn and get used to."

"But — but —" O'Brien searched through his erupting brain and at last found a coherent thought. "But you were so sick!"

"The symbiosis was not established without difficulty," Smathers admitted. "And we are not identical with the M a r t i a n s physiologically. However, it's all over now. We will r e t u r n to Earth, spread Belov's Disease — if you want to keep calling it that—and begin our exploration of space and time. Eventually, we'd like to get in touch with the Martians in the—the *place* where they have gone."

"And we'll have bigger wars than we ever dreamed of!"

The thing that had once been Tom Smathers, second assistant engineer, shook its head. "There will be no more wars. Among the mental powers enlarged a thousand times is one that has to do with what you might call moral concepts. Those of us on the ship could and would stop any presently threatening war; but when the population of the world has made neural connection with Belov's bacillus all danger will be past. No, there will be no more wars."

A SILENCE. O'Brien tried to pull himself t o g e t h e r. "Well," he said. "We really found something on Mars, didn't we? And if we're going to start back for Earth, I might as well prepare a course based on present planetary positions."

Again that look in Smathers' eyes, stronger than ever. "That won't be necessary, O'Brien. We won't go back in the same manner as we came. Our way will be—well, *faster*."

"G o o d enough," O'Brien said shakily and got to his feet. "And while you're working out the details, I'll climb into a space-suit and hustle down to that Martian city. I want to get me a good strong dose of Belov's Disease."

The thing that had been Tom Smathers g r u n t e d. O'Brien stopped. Suddenly he understood the meaning of that frightening look he had had first from Belov and now from Smathers.

It was a look of enormous pity.

"That's right," said Smathers with infinite gentleness. "You can't ever get Belov's Disease. You are naturally immune."

∞ ∞ ∞

Tales for Tomorrow

Here's a prediction that's 100% sure: you'll be as enthusiastic as we are about the stories in the January issue of INFINITY. The contents will include: "A Likely Story" by Damon Knight, in which one of the most powerful—and dangerous—secrets of the universe falls into very strange hands indeed; "The Engineer" by Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth, a masterful and biting satire about a highly probable world of tomorrow; "One Plus One" by Randall Garrett; "Traumerei" by Charles Beaumont, and many other astonishing stories by today's top-notch writers. It's a sure thing that you won't want to miss it, or any other issue of INFINITY from now on.

Practice makes perfect in some cases—but not in this eerie instance!

KID STUFF

By WINSTON MARKS

WHY ME? Why, out of 300 billion people on earth, why did they have to pick on *me*?

And if it had to happen, why couldn't it have happened before I met Betty and fell in love with her? You see, Betty and I were to be married tomorrow. We *were* to have been married. Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, indeed! What a ghastly thought that is! How can I explain to Betty—to anyone! I can't face her, and what could I say on the telephone? "Sorry, Betty, I can't marry you. I'm no longer—quite human."

Quit joking, Kelley! This is for real. You're sober and awake and it did happen. Marrying Betty is out of the question even if she'd have you the way you are. You're not *that* two-faced!

Quit standing in front of the mirror, naked and shaking, looking for scars, counting your fingers and toes. You've taken a hundred inventories, and it always comes out wrong. And it always will, unless . . . unless *they* come back. But that's hopeless. They'd never find me again. Not out of all the people on earth. Besides, they didn't

seem to give a damn. No more than a kid gives a damn what happens to a lump of modelling clay when he gets bored squeezing it into this shape and that.

Where did they come from? Or, judging from their "talk," *when* did they come from? And would it do me any good if I knew?

I WAS SITTING there in my bachelor apartment, drinking a can of beer and trying to work a crossword puzzle to get sleepy. I wasn't especially jittery like the groom is always supposed to be on the eve of his wedding. Just wide awake at midnight, wanting to get sleepy so I could get some real rest when I went to bed.

Just sitting there trying to think of a two-letter word for "sun-god." And that made me think of the gold in Betty's hair when the sun was on it at the beach. And pretty soon I was just staring into space, aching for Betty, wishing the next twelve hours of my life would vanish and we could be together, heading for our little cottage at the lake.

Staring into space. . . . Then it wasn't just space. There were these two big ball bearings in front of me, about three feet in diameter, if you could say they had a diameter. They looked like ball bearings because their surfaces were shiny, mirrorlike steel. But they had unevenly spaced, smooth bumps. Something like the random knobs on a potato, so they weren't really round at all.

The light from my lamp reflected crazily, and my own image gaped back at me from their distorted, reflecting curves. Like the fun-mirrors at the crazy-house, only crazier . . . and not funny at all. Fear is never funny. And I was afraid. I'll swear I could *taste* the terror. It was salty on my tongue. When I tried to cry out, the roof of my mouth felt like old concrete.

Then one of them spoke. "It's alive! Intelligent! It senses our presence!"

I was receiving pure thought, not words. But man thinks only in words. And their thoughts fished suitable words from my subconscious to frame them for my assimilation.

Telepathy? Impossible! What common points of reference could I have with these two unthinkably alien lifeforms?

The answer whipped back at me on an intuitive, subvocal level: Thought is a universal energy manifestation.

Language is only the clumsy vehicle for thought.

Between me and the aliens lay no such barrier.

"Obviously intelligent," the other agreed. "Feel those gamma radiations? Too bad they're so weak. It would be interesting if he could communicate with us."

I stammered aloud, "But—but I *can* communicate with you. I understand every—"

They were paying no attention to my raspy words. "Yes, that's typical of these ancient, organic life-forms. As I recall, they use some form of physical vibration of their gaseous medium for communicating among themselves—"

"Speaking of which," the other interrupted, "this particular gaseous medium seems to contain oxygen. We'd best not remain overlong or we'll corrode and catch hell when we return."

"Exude a little nickel if it irritates you. We'll catch hell anyway when mother—"

Yes, that's the word that came to me!

"—discovers *when* we've been. I'm curious about these flesh and blood creatures. I wonder who invented this clumsy monstrosity."

HE MEANT ME. He rolled a foot nearer, and the other followed with an uncertain wobble. "I turned out better in the third grade."

"Liar! You nearly flunked meta-plastics."

"Well, you did flunk it, so who are you to—?"

"Just don't be over-critical. I think this one looks fairly practical. Well-balanced—"

"That's just what I mean. Observe the unimaginative bi-symmetry. Two arms, two legs, two eyes, five fingers on each hand, five toes on each foot. Surely, the inventor was a mechanic and no artist. In this light gravity there was no need for—"

"And how would you improve the design, your high-and-mightiness?"

"First let's remove the covering."

My clothes left my body gently, but with the sound of violent tearing. In two seconds I sat naked, my garments laid back like split bandages.

I shouted, "See here, for God's sakes!"

The aliens had made no visible move, yet they had wielded powerful forces to strip everything I wore from my body, shirt, slacks, underwear and even my shoes . . . without so much as pinching my flesh.

I leaped to my feet naked as a straw. They were be-

tween me and the door, but they seemed so clumsy. . . .

"Watch it! He's alarmed. Don't let him escape!"

"Try and stop me!" I screamed, tensing my muscles for a leap over the pair of intruders. Suddenly the air about my sweating body seemed to thicken to the viscosity of molasses. I could breathe it all right, but quick motion was denied me. My grand leap died before my right foot left the floor. I retreated to my chair in slow-motion panic, sinking slowly through the clabbered atmosphere, to a sitting position on my torn clothing.

"Yes, a very clumsy, unesthetic life-form. In fact the bisymmetry fairly nauseates me. Granted that the two arms are practical, doubtless one or the other does 90% of all work. So why have them of equal importance? See here, I'll demonstrate. . . ."

"Wait!" the other cautioned. "This is a sentient creature. You can't operate without . . ."

"Of course not!"

Something buzzed in my spine, and I blanked out. For the space of one breath, it seemed.

"There, that's better."

"I guess I must agree with you."

A faint tingle in my left arm caused me to stare at it. Unbelievingly! Its length was the same, but its diameter was reduced to two-thirds, and there were two fingers missing on the hand. The opposable thumb remained, but it now had more the appearance of a claw than a human hand. I tried to scream, but the sound was a glutinous bubble of air that never reached my lips.

"How about the pedal appendages?"

"Well—" there was some hesitation. "Considering the method of locomotion, bisymmetry seems more justified there. However, why bilateral? Why not quadrilateral?"

"Because the organs of sight face only one way."

"I can fix that, too."

My spine buzzed, and when I looked down again a flood of peculiar changes had taken place. My ankles terminated in the middle of my feet, and my heels had disappeared. In their place were toes.

"You see, with the double-hinged knee-joint, he can travel forward or backward now without pivoting. . . ."

Then I became aware that I could *look* forward and backward at the same time.

"That thing in the middle is certainly superfluous."

"Yes."

Buzz!

It was gone.

"A tentacle fastened, say, to the right hip-bone could be very useful."

Buzz!

My right hip tingled. From it protruded a whip-like appendage some eight feet long, brown and leathery, tapering to the diameter of a pencil and terminating in a pink flesh-pad richly supplied with sensory buds. I could feel every hair in the nap of the carpet on which it rested—feel, taste, smell and hear! Four sense organs in one!

"Now we are making progress!" came the exclamation.

Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!

The instant-seeming anesthetic moments came upon me in quick succession, and each left me bereft of some standard, human equipment or in the possession of some extra-normal addition to my anatomy—with no more sensation than the slight tingle I have mentioned.

From their mental remarks I conclude that I lost my vermiform appendix, tonsils and a mole on my left shoulder blade. Most of the other items which I acquired were too grotesque to describe further.

"The two additional cardiac structures and the adrenal adjustments should assure some likelihood of immortality," one of the intruders was explaining.

"Which would probably bring about over-population in ten generations," the other reminded him.

"Ah, yes. I should compensate for that."

Buzz, and he did!

"I'm corroding."

"Exude some chrome as I told you."

"I think I hear mother calling, anyway. Let's go before she—"

THEY WERE too late. A third bumpy ball-bearing materialized behind the two aliens, and instantly a barrage of maternal scolding dominated the ether. "I've been searching the whole continuum for you two! What are you doing back here?"

"We were just about to return, Mother."

"That's the truth, Mother. We just broke through here so we could practice our advanced—"

"Practice!" Mother exclaimed. "Practice on this poor, primitive, organic creature?"

I felt poor and primitive indeed. Paralyzed with fear, my only wonder now was that apparently I had retained my

sanity throughout this waking nightmare.

"We didn't hurt him."

"You put him back the way you found him, do you understand? Do it right this instant!"

"Yes, Mother. Let's see, how *did* we find him?"

"Simple bilateral symmetry, stupid!"

"Oh, yes, two of everything except—"

"Hold it! Remember the anaesthesia."

Buzz!

WHEN I AWAKENED this time they were gone. My electric clock hummed softly on the mantle, revealing the nonsensical information that less than an hour had passed since my visitors first arrived.

I staggered to my feet, bracing myself against the thick air, but the air was just ordinary, thin, substanceless air again. My hand dropped to my right hip.

The tentacle was gone.

"Thank God!" I breathed, and for an instant my common sense tried to insist that I had merely fallen asleep for a few minutes and dreamed the whole fantastic sequence.

But no! Why would I be stark naked? And why were my clothes lying ruined in my chair like bandages split with a huge razor?

I clenched my left fist and gained comfort from the reassuring pressure of four fingers and a thumb in my palm. But then I stepped into my bedroom and stood before my full-length mirror—where I have stood rooted ever since.

And the question revolves in my brain, punctuated only by my profanity and sobs of despair. How can I marry Betty now? How can I face her, let alone marry her?

What woman on earth could bring herself to marry a man with no navel . . . and two heads?

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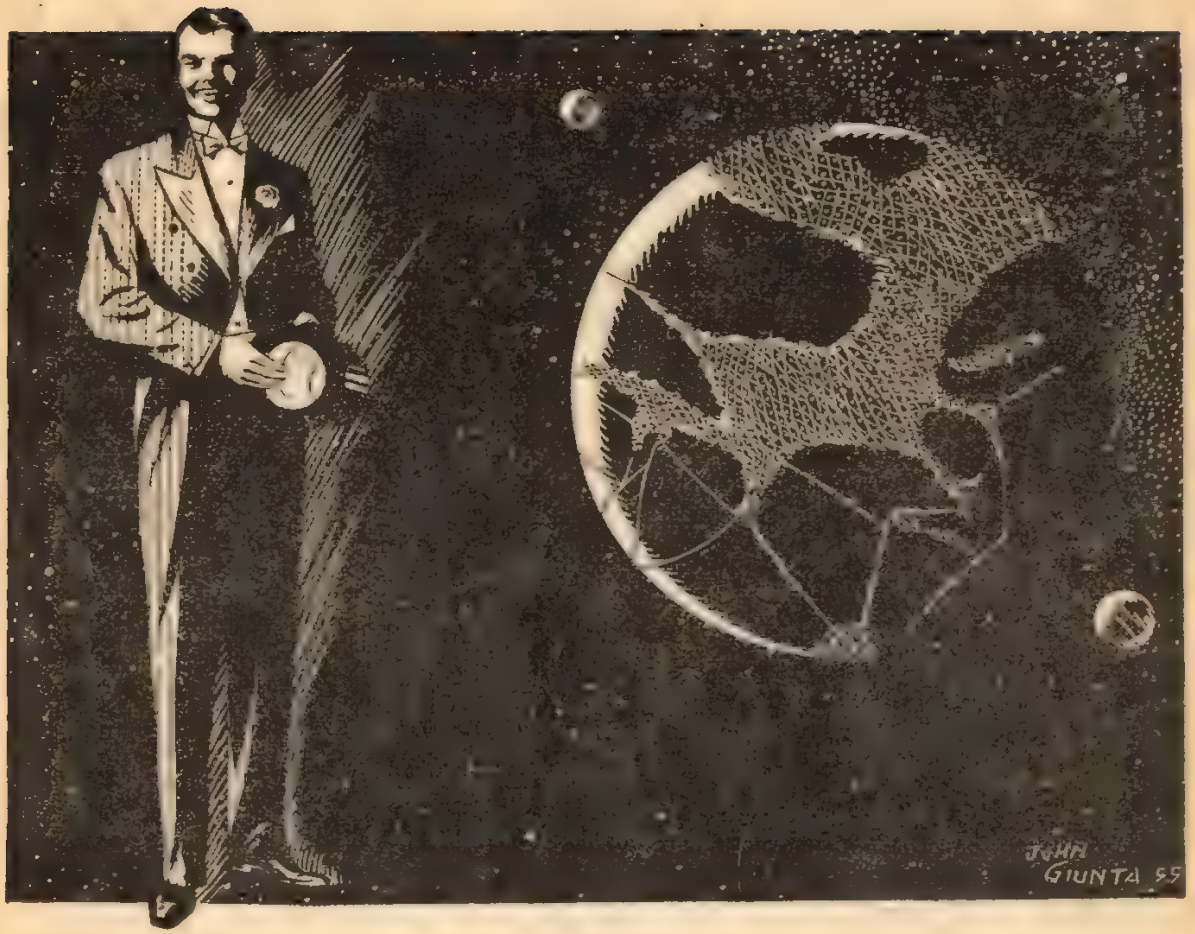


Illustrated by GIUNTA

Class? That's Bobby Baxter's middle name! The proof? Space Operas, Inc!

Have Tux—Will Travel

by ROBERT BLOCH

Takeoff, N. M.
August 1, 2042

DEAR WALLIE:

I suppose you caught my ad in *Variety* by this time.

Well, it's strictly legit.

I'm really on Mars-time now!

Bet you couldn't believe it when you read it, huh? Seeing as how you know I been turning down big deals to play

Luna Circuit for years—everybody in the biz after me, you know. Could of named my own price, but I told you how I felt. You don't catch Bobby Baxter wasting the old personality on a bunch of space-happy colonials with crater-dust in their ears. Let 'em drool over me on feelio if they got the urge.

Which reminds me, before I forget it. Caught your act from Las Vegas on feelio the other night. You still haven't got the angle, kid. Stinx. Flash, but oldstyle. Cut out the monolog intro. Build up the tap routine. Hell, if I had the time I could teach you the ropes. Book you into 4D—I got a lot of contacts, you know.

But I can't. The rocket leaves tomorrow. They'll be rolling out the red carpet for yours truly. If they got any red carpets up there.

Well, kid, I suppose you're wondering what made me do it. You say to yourself, here's this Baxter character, got all the personality in the world, hottest comic working today. What's he mean by jetting off to a place where they never even heard of feelio, still goof around with oldfashioned live acts?

That's the answer, sweetheart. Live acts. I've never worked with a real audience: I guess nobody has in the last 50 years. Get some kicks out of the idea—like in the old days, comics all wanted to play *Hamlet*. By the way, some day I may get around to that little thing just for the hell of it. I never scanned any Shakespeer but the old creep must of had something or you wouldn't hear all this talk. Of course, I figure I'd have to rewrite, on account of from what they tell me this Shakespeer was pretty sad when it comes to gags. But I could make a real Bobby Baxter Production out of it. Kill the people.

But I was telling you how I come to take this Mars deal. Sam Fogle put me up to it. He books the Luna Circuit, you know, and he bumped into me the other day in NY and started to bend my ear about this new outfit of his he's setting up on Mars. Calls it *Space Operas, Inc.*

Seems he was up there a couple years back, looking over the situation, and he says the Martians are just ape for human shows. Of course, they never see anything except those old Cinerama movies the museum boys took along years ago. But he talked around, and he found out they got their own entertainment. Just

like a hundred, two hundred years ago here on earth. Traveling performances, even circuses. And all of it from poverty. Give you some idea of what goes over big with the Martians, they like carneys the best. Oldstyle carneys, under canvas, like they used to have here back in the live days. Sideshows with all native talent of course. Fogle says they're pretty sad. Not a jet character in the biz. And their musicians are even worse. Don't know their ASCAP from a hole in a piccolo.

Just to show you how bad it is, they still have geeks. You know that old carney pitch they tell about—some guy with a fright-wig down in a pit, gnawing the head off a chicken. Of course, they don't call them geeks up there, and they don't have any chickens. Fogle said they're called *porlees* and the thing they use in the act is a sort of bird like a chicken, a *gotch*. But it's the same deal.

DON'T SOUND like much, does it, kid? But you know old Fogle. He kept telling me about the big new theater they got at Inport. Says there's fifty showhouses all over, the Martians built themselves. And he went and took an option on all of them—the works. Rebuilt the stage of the Inport house, too. That's how much he thinks of the possibilities up there.

Fogle told me he figured he could start something just like regular old earthstyle vaudeville with live acts. Turn that Inport house into the big deal. You ever hear about the Palace, kid? Jettest thing in the biz a hundred years ago. In NY, when they had the old Keith-Orpheum time or whatever they called it, the thing was to play the Palace. If you went over there, you were in for life.

Well, that's Fogle's deal. He's going to bring show biz to Mars, with live acts. Got to be live, because even if he could get a feelio transmitter up there, or a 4D setup, the natives couldn't see it. On account of the three eyes, you know. They don't get the pictures right. Cinerama works, but not very well. Live stuff is what they really go ape for.

Fogle says it's a gamble, but he stuck plenty into it and thinks whoever gets there first will make millions.

Naturally, when it come to digging up the right talent, he thought of me. That's why he cornered me in his office.

So I told him absolutely no dice, did he think I was going

to give up a sweet setup here to go running off on a 9G rocket and do my stuff for a bunch of yokels with three eyes? If they go for *porlees* nibbling a *gotch*, how're they gonna appreciate real Bobby Baxter material?

And so forth and so on. Then this Maxine Miller toddled in. I don't know if you ever caught her or not, she's done some stuff on feelio out east but not much on account of her material being a little bit on the blue side. But believe me, kid, she is pure hydrazine. Racked, stacked and shellacked. With the slickest figure I ever laid hands—I mean eyes on. If you know what I mean, kid.

Up to that time I wasn't what you'd call sold on the deal. Until I find out this Maxine Miller is signed with Fogle to open at Inport.

Of course she was just about crazy when she found out who I was. I don't blame the kid, and I got to hand it to her for covering up the way she did. But anybody could see she was dying to work with a name like me.

So I told Fogle yes, I could make it. And when was he planning to take off?

I flipped when he said next Tuesday—that's tomorrow, kid. I asked him what about the rest of the lineup? And he said he was going to book whatever he could pick up on short notice.

Well, you don't catch Bobby Baxter with his socks down, not me. I smelled a right angle here, and I pitched it. Told Fogle he was in for a lot of trouble, booking blind. And if he figured on opening at Inport soon as he arrived, he wouldn't have any time for rehearsals. Guess the poor guy was so excited he'd forgotten all about that: seeing as how he'd already gone ahead and started to beat the drums up there about the first night performance.

I told him why not leave the whole deal to me? For a couple of extra bills a week, I'd take charge of the works —book some flash to pad out, make it a regular Bobby Baxter Production. Of course, the idea would be to build the show around me, and maybe spot this Maxine Miller. But you got to have at least four other acts to warm up a house.

Well, Fogle was so happy to get me he said okay, anything I wanted. But not over three yards for the talent budget until we see how the thing goes. Maybe we'll find out they just like acrobats or something. Got to sort of feel our way.

Which I am now doing. With the acts all this afternoon, at auditions. And which I plan to do tonight, when I have dinner with this Maxine Miller. If you get what I mean.

So that's the pitch. I figured you'd like to know. Will drop you another line when I get a chance. Right now I got to do an off to Buffalo.

Your ever-loving
Bobby

In Free Fall
August 6, 2042

DEAR WALLIE:

Catch this flash stationary! Really class, yes? I never knew they had this space-travel duked out so much. Why this ship is just like a fancy hotel, good as anything in Las Vegas or Miami B. And this artifical gravity or whatever they call it works perfect. Never know you were in free fall at all.

I got the best cabin on board, even better than Fogle's. Spend a lot of time here, too, with Maxine. Sweetheart, I'm really in, let me give you the word on that!

Whole deal is jet. Couple floops, but they don't amount to much. You know how it is, everything at the last minute—had a little trouble picking up any acts. Seems like I couldn't dig up enough singles who were at liberty, ready to take off on a route like this without any advance notice.

And I was spotting singles, on account of the budget. Only about eight showed up for the audition, and they were mostly dogs. Some kind of singer—grand opera, I guess she called it—old fatso with a set of pipes like the whole Rocketeer Chorus Line going at once. Out, of course. Told her this was *Space Opera,* not grand opera or whatever.

Got a pretty good juggler—name of Martini, he does some trick stuff with cocktail glasses, bottles. Ends up balancing a bottle on his head and a glass on his nose; pours from the bottle into the glass, then flips an olive into it.

You happen to know a hoofer named Terry King? He's along. Does that trick dance on stilts. Strictly a filler, but he works cheap. Also a fellow name of Murphy, he has a flash balancing act, slack wire with a bicycle. Juggles indian clubs with his feet. Reason I picked him is to give those three-eyed rubes something to talk about. Figure they never saw any faster action than a *porlees* chasing a *gotch.* This is the kind of stuff that will panic the house.

Had a little trouble getting

Murphy's equipment through. Seems they're pretty fussy about weight on these flights, and his rig and bike and clubs are pretty heavy.

They told me okay, they'd take it, but couldn't I leave out one of my trunks? I raised plenty hell about that, believe me—if you think I'm going to open on Mars without a decent wardrobe, you're space-happy, I told the guy. Why, this is practicly what you might say a historical ocassion and all. Besides, I got to have at least six changes because the way I got it figured I'm m.c.-ing the show and filling in all down the line.

That's on account of getting stuck with Mary and Jim.

THEY'RE THE floops I was going to tell you about. Like I say, there was this trouble picking up acts at liberty on such short notice. Tell the truth, by the time I run through the audition the afternoon before we took off I was getting kind of desparate, if you know what I mean. Because it looked like I would not be able to put on a real Bobby Baxter Production.

Just at the last minute these two kids show up—this Mary and Jim. Mary Connor and Jim Hastings. Team, but I never heard of them. She sings and he does instrumental solos. I asked where they'd been booking and they told me radio. Radio, for crying out loud, did you ever hear of such a thing? I didn't even know they still *had* radio. But I guess, out in the mountains or wherever they run a couple stations or whatever they're called. And these two kids do some kind of act.

Well, like I said, I was strickly on the ropes, no more time for auditions, and a hole in the show to fill. I looked them over. Young stuff, and they were just about frantic to get a chance like this. Matter of fact, the guy—Hastings—said he'd go along just for the ride and the billing. The girl was willing to take peanuts. Not much on looks, no wardrobe, and on top of it she wears glasses, yet. You know what I mean, spectacels, the real oldstyle deal, not even contact lenses.

Maxine was sitting next to me when this pair come up and it was all she could do to keep from going into histerics over the getup. I wanted to turn thumbs down, of course, but Maxine gave me the word. Pointed out the bill was weak on music and maybe this guy Jim Hastings could accompany her. She asked him and he said sure, he thought so.

So I said what about the girl, and Maxine said she did not think there was any comparison between their styles. It might make a good contrast. What she was really thinking, of course, was how she'd look compared to this Mary creep—I know how these babes figure.

But anything to keep Maxine happy. I wound up telling Mary and Jim okay, and we'd put together a show and rehearse it on the flight out.

That's what we did.

And that's why I got fill-ins to worry about.

Held a rehearsal the first day. Martini's great. So is the hoofer, and so is Murphy—the slack-wire guy. All novelty acts, but with my line of chatter for a buildup, I'll make those triple-eyed yahoos think they're seeing the greatest show on earth. You know that old Bobby Baxter charm, sweetheart. I can really pour it on.

But even I couldn't save Mary and Jim.

Here's the payoff.

Mary's a singer, all right. And what do you suppose she sings? Ballads. That's it, brother. Ballads, yet. Oldies. Stuff you never even heard of, from before feelio. *Moon in My Heart. Crater of Love. Thunder and Roses,* I ask you. And talk about projection—there ain't. She just stands there and sings.

You ought to see Maxine move into one of her specialties to get the difference. She does this material of hers, something called *Air on a G-String,* a strip, but very refined like. And believe me, brother, she projects.

Even though I don't know what in hell we'll do about an accompanist, unless I double in brass for her.

Because the rest of the payoff is this guy Jim Hastings. The musician. *He* says. Know what kind of a musician he is? Turns out he plays a mouth-organ! That's a harmonicker, son. Bet you never even heard of it. Oldfangled dingus you play by putting in your mouth and blowing on it. Not a horn. Hell, I can't describe it to you. And the sounds it makes you wouldn't want to know about. What a floop!

This is what I got to work with. On a Bobby Baxter Production! Well, not me. Minute I got a squint at their act, I yanked it. Maxine or no Maxine, nobody's going to louse me up on a historical ocassion. Not this Thespeean.

I told Fogle, I said, "By Xst, I'll do the whole show myself before I let them get

out there. If I got to drag out every routine in the book!"

And it looks like I'm doing just about that. Carrying the whole performance on my back. But I promised Maxine she could have at least four numbers, and that makes her happy.

One thing I will say, she sure warmed up to me in a hurry. Once she got a chance to know me.

I been seeing she gets plenty chances, too. Last night for the gag of it I turned off the artificail gravity in my cabin. You wouldn't believe what happened unless you tried it yourself sometime. Which I advise you to do. If you can ever latch onto something like this Maxine, it's worth the trip.

Well, I got to go offbeam now. She just rapped on the door and it looks like we're going into free fall again.

Your ever-loving

Bobby

Still in Free Fall
August 9, 2042

DEAR WALLIE:

This is a quickie.

We land tomorrow and Fogle's as itchy as grandpa's underwear. I don't blame the guy, he's got all this dough tied up. But there's nothing to worry about. I keep telling him everything's ready to jet.

Lined up a pretty good little show, if I do say so myself. Rehearsing every day in the lounge, and last night we let the rest of the passengers in for a sort of preview. They went absolutely ape over the whole deal.

Of course, I was in top form. I'm doing my horse act —you know the routine, where I come out in this half of a horse costume. The rear half. Like I'd been going to a masquerade party only my partner stood me up. Very funny, special material stuff. Blue, but sutle. You know how sutle I can get.

Well, it murdered the people. Then I got another bit, the psichytrist bit. This one plays with a stooge, see, and I got Maxine up in the part to help me out. Can't take the time to run through it, but this ought to give you a rough idea of what it's like.

Maxine comes out on the stage and she says to me, "Hi, Bobby, what you doing these days?"

And I say, "I'm a psichytrist, see?"

Then she feeds me, "A psichytrist? That's a soft racket. All you guys do is sit around in your office waiting for patients to come in. Then you throw them on the couch, ask

a lot of stupid questions, and charge a big price."

So I say, "Just a minute, now. First of all, you gotta understand we go to school for seven years. Then we gotta be inturns. Then we specialise. And those questions aren't stupid, either.

"For instance, I might ask a patient, what is it that a dog does in the back yard that you wouldn't want to step in? The answer is, he digs a hole.

"Or I ask, what does a woman have two of that a cow has four of? The answer is, feet.

"Or I ask, what does a man do standing, a woman sitting, and a dog on three legs? The answer is, shakes hands.

"But believe me—you'd be surprised at some of the crazy answers I get to those questions!"

That's only a part of it, I cleaned it up a lot, because if there's one thing I'm aiming at it's class. Class all the way—that's a Bobby Baxter trademark you might say.

And I just fractured the passengers. Shows it pays to be sutle.

That's what I was telling this Mary Connor fluff. She's been hanging around a lot lately, ever since I gave her and Jim the sad word about their act. Says she's awful sorry, and maybe I could sort of give her a couple pointers. They'll be going right back to earth on the next flight out when we land, and I guess this is her only chance to see a real Big Timer operate.

Also—this is rich, son—the poor creep is gone on me. You never saw anything like it, the way she's got it. Can't leave me alone. I have a helluva time shaking her when Maxine and I want to be together, which is usually.

She even tried to fix her hair, and the other day she come around without her glasses on. So nearsighted she kept bumping into stuff. I had to laugh. Of course, I just give her the old freeze routine, but she keeps coming back.

Her partner, this Jim Hastings, he don't know what to make of it all. He went and got himself engaged to Mary or something awful like that, and now he's from nowhere and besides he's burned because I tossed the act out.

The little rat even went to Sam Fogle behind my back the other day and put up a beef, claims he's got a contract and he wants to show.

Naturally Sam told me about it, and I gave him the third word on it—nobody plays without my say-so. I want this deal to be perfect.

Understand *Variety* and *Billboard* will both be covering the opening, and I got my reputation. No floops for Bobby Baxter.

I never even let on to Jim that I knew he squawked. But just to teach him a lesson, I been forceing myself to play up to this Mary a little. Not much, because I can't stand the creep, but enough so as to give him a hard time.

You know me, kid, I'm too soft-hearted to really pull any rough stuff. Besides, Maxine is all the time watching me these days.

Well, I got no more time to write now. Tomorrow we land and tomorrow night is the historical moment when show biz really comes to Mars.

I know you'll be waiting to catch those writeups in *Variety* and *Billboard*. But don't go green over them, kid, who knows, someday you may be up there yourself. If you ever learn the secret like I did, which is to develop that old loveable personality.

Your ever-loving
Bobby

Inport, Mars
August 11, 2042

DEAR WALLIE:

Well, I suppose the reviews are out.

Of course I havn't seen them up here, but before you or anybody else gets funny ideas, let me give you the real inside story of what happened.

If you think I'm taking this lying down, you're crazy. When I get through with this double-crossing rat of a Sam Fogle he won't be able to book a stag smoker date in the crater of Abulfeda or wherever.

I knew the whole setup was a phoney from the word go. That's what I wrote you, remember? If it wasn't I'm so much of a idealis, I never would of listened to that lieing dog. Sneaking around and appealling to my better nature about how I owe it to the biz to pioneer and bring high class entertainment to Mars! And all the while giving me that pitch about how they were ape for real talent. Why, those three-eyed apes would not recognise real talent if it come up and did a bump-and-grind right under their noses. If they had noses, that is.

Noses they ain't. Also all of them are about seven feet tall, or did you know that? And they smell funny. They eat funny food, too, and none of them smoke or drink or weed, either—bunch of creeps, if you ask me. Even if you don't ask me, I'm telling you. No wonder they got such lousy

taste! It's pitiful, kid, believe me.

Well, I don't see the sense of giving you a long song and dance about what's wrong with the Martians—you ought to be able to figure for yourself when you read the reviews. (Hell, they're so dumb they don't even know they're Martians. Really! They call themselves *borteks*, some damned thing. I'm surprised those foureigners even had even sense to learn English, the way they talk.) Everything they do is crazy.

I was so excited about landing and all that I didn't notice much at first. They had a big reception arranged for us when we come off, and Sam Fogle sure had lined up some sweet publicity. The house was á sellout three hours after the box office opened, at noon. Some of these three-eyed goops had stood in line since the night before to get tickets.

Sam was plenty enthused when he found that it. Two carneys playing in town at the same time, and they were dying; absolutely. No biz at all. Everybody wanted to see Bobby Baxter.

"This is it," he told me. "Your gonna roll 'em in the aisles tonight."

Roll 'em in the aisles. That's a hot one! One account of this big showhouse he was talking about, the best spot in Inport, doesn't even *have* any aisles. Or seats, either. So help me, it's that way all over this damned planet. Martians never sit down, it turns out—and they watch their shows standing up!

Ever try to play to a standing house? You know it's murder. I told Fogle that, but he said it didn't matter, we had to make allowances for strange customs. When in Rome, do the Romans before they do you, or however it is.

Mostly he was worried about the gravity. Maybe you never heard of it, but another thing on this dizzy planet, they got the wrong kind of gravity. I can't explain it, not being what you call technicle-minded, but up here I only weigh 60 pounds.

So help me, that's right! 60 pounds I weigh, on account of their lousy gravity. Bounce right up in the air when I walk fast if I'm not careful.

Fogle told me we better have a rehearsal before showtime, to get used to the difference. Which was a good idea, except that the local press wanted interviews all afternoon. Catch me lousing up a million dollars worth of free publicity. Not on your life, kid. So I did the sensible thing

and got buddy with the press. So the first show might be a little ragged, I figured these yahoos would never notice. Just so we got the press on our side.

Get that. I sacerficed a chance to rehearse, just to make sure Fogle got the breaks on publicity. I gave up a run-through only because I wanted to see that everybody in Inport knew about our show. I spent right up until supper time telling these three-eyed reporters all about the performance—where I used to play on earth, what I did in feelio, how I socked 'em in 4D, anything they wanted to know. Even what I liked to eat, intimate stuff, just to make friends you might say.

I did all that. Then I went backstage and set the cues, and saw to it that all the props were there, and I even had to tell the stoop stagehands how to handle the lights. Troubles? You got no idea what troubles. I never had no love for the Union before, but when I see what these three-eyed foureigners call a lighting setup, it's murder.

Anyhow, I got it all set, just knocked myself out for Fogle's sake—and all the time he's interfering, keeps telling me what about giving Martini and the other a chance to practise with their props, nagging at me like I could do eight things at once when I'm trying to help Maxine zip into her breakaway dress. Anybody with sense would of walked out on him right then and there.

But you know me, kid, always good-natured. So I just kept on working and politely told him he should keep his goddam yap shut and let me run this show. Because it was my show, and he'd better not forget it, or he'd end up going out there all by himself and doing a two-hour single.

After that he calmed down, and I managed to line things up. I had this Jim and Mary working carrying props and stuff, and I put Jim in charge of the dumb juicers—at least he knew enough to handle lighting cues, I figured. Mary was hanging around, so I made her unpack my stuff and line it up and sew up my horse costume which got kind of tore in the trunk.

Then it was time, and the house was packed—one thing I got to say about this business of no seats, you can sure jam in a crowd that way.

So we opened.

I SUPPOSE you figure I'm going to hand you a lot of

excuses now, because of the writeups. But why should I? You know me, kid. You've caught me enough times to realize Bobby Baxter never gave a bad performance in his life. The show must go on, that's my motto.

And you can tell anyone who asks you that you got it straight from me—Bobby Baxter did a great show that night. I was never better, believe me.

Can *I* help it if I was working the lousiest audience in the world? (World? In the universe, yet!)

Can I help it if this jerk juggler of a Martini uses liquor props in front of a crowd that never heard of drinking and don't know what he's doing? Is it my headache if his olive keeps floating around in the air on account of this crazy Martian gravity business?

Am I to blame for gravity, already? I ask you, *am* I? So when Terry King does his tap-dance on the stilts and he can't keep them on the ground, what am I supposed to do—run out there and tie weights to the things?

Is it my fault if Murphy's indian clubs sail forty feet in the air when he tries to juggle them, and his bike falls off the slack wire and hits him on the head just when he's got his neck twisted in the rope?

He didn't even get hurt bad, and the way he looked would get a yak out of any audience —except these three-eyed schmoes. They don't even think a pratt-fall is funny.

On top of it, Maxine Miller has to rope me into accompanying her on a midget piano when she goes on for her first strip. You think gravity can louse up a juggler—let me tell you, kid, just watch a peeler work with a breakaway costume that usually doesn't unzip unless you tug three times harder than you need to up here. She just gave one little yank and the whole damn outfit come off her. Like somebody unveiling a statue. Had to finish up her first number behind the piano, and like I say, it was only a midget piano. That sure gave those three-eyed characters a triple eyeful, but do you think they appreciated it? Not them, brother! They couldn't dig her songs at all.

Ignorant, that's the trouble with them. Just plain ignorant. I kept trying to hoke it up. Like I said, I never did a better job—I was out there myself most of the time, just knocking myself out with routines. Gave 'em everything in the old book.

Talk about a cold house! They just plain didn't *get* it. The hind end of a horse routine, for instance. I guess none of them had ever *seen* a horse. Just couldn't figure out what the gags were about. And that psichytrist bit, they could not catch that one either.

Right in the middle of it, they sat down. That's right, they all started to sit down!

I nearly flipped, and when I come off there was Fogle busting a gut in the wings. "You're dead!" he kept yelling. "Know what that means? When they sit down on you up here, it's like they walked out on you back on earth."

I said, "Who told you that malarkey?" and he said, "Jim Hastings. He's been talking to some of the natives on the stage crew. They all say your show stinx."

Then he started to go into a heavy routine, but I shut him up in a hurry. I told him I was sick and tired of beating my brains out for an unnapprecaitive audience, and if he knew anybody who could do a better job, he'd better start looking them up in a hurry. Because as far as I was concerned, he could take his show and shove it into the next rocket leaving for earth.

That scared hell out of him, believe me. He kept moaning, "What can we do? Got an hour to go and nothing left. You got to save this turkey."

I told him it was all his fault, which it was, and the best thing I could think of was for him to go out there and tell his three-eyed vaudeville lovers they could get their money back.

WELL, you know Sam Fogle, how he is when it comes to facing an audience. Full of big talk about how everybody else should go out and knock 'em dead, but when it comes to him, he's scared to blow his nose in a public phone-booth.

So he begged me, I should go make the announcement. Of course I just laughed at him.

Then this Jim Hastings comes up and says he'll do it. Which is okay by Fogle.

And out he goes, only he double-crosses me. He doesn't make any announcement. Instead, he starts going into his act. Of all the hammy tricks you ever heard of, this is the worst! Goes right out there with this harmoniker of his and cuts loose. You never heard such a blat in your life.

Before I know it, he's done two numbers and those creeps are beginning to stand up again. Then he waves into the

wings and out comes Mary, of course, wearing her glasses yet because she's in such a hurry she forgot to take them off.

Know what she looked like, she looked like one of those Martians with an eye missing. On account of the glasses frames giving her that big, frog-eyed look they all have. Maybe they *thought* she was a Martian, because they started to hiss.

Did I tell you hissing is the way they applaud up here? Well, it is. Talk about *crazy!*

What's the sense of trying to explain it? Right away they go into one of their own routines. Never heard anything like it, never. Joe Miller stuff, with Martian switcheroos, yet.

Like, "Why does a *lavka* cross a canal?" And "Why do *morkogleps* wear red suspenders?"

Brother! I ask you!

And then Mary starts to sing, all that corny ballad stuff, and Jim slobbers into his mouth-organ or whatever, and they have to keep coming back for encores. Never heard such hissing. The crowd ends up by throwing vegetables at them—which is something almost never heard of, because vegetables are so hard to get up here. Like showering them with diamonds, yet....

One hour and forty minutes they improvise out there, and when we ring down the curtain it's a madhouse. Fogle wants to go on tour right away, but he can't, because the show is sold out three months in advance, including sitting-room only. (That's right, kid, when they can't get standing room, some of them are willing to sit on the railings of the balcony.)

Martini, Terry King and Murphy are going back on the next flight. I guess Maxine is going, too—let me tell you one thing, kid, a dame has no gratitude, and listening to her talk you'd think I had personally loused up her act. So let her go.

Not me, though. If Sam Fogle thinks he can get away with this, he's space-happy. Nobody's putting on a Bobby Baxter Production without Bobby Baxter. He's not going to run a full show featuring just that broken-down harmoniker player and a corny girl singer. Even if I did say I was quitting, I got a contract.

So no matter what the papers say, don't you worry, kid. He can't do this to me. I'll sue!

Your ever-loving

Bobby

Dopunk, Mars
August 30, 2042

DEAR WALLIE:

Just time for a line between shows.

That's right, I'm working again—you never thought they could kick Bobby Baxter out of show business, did you?

Of course you know they tried. It must of been in the papers. These damn space-lawyers are no good, wouldn't even issue an injunktion or anything. So Fogle's going bigger than ever here.

Last I heard, he's sending back to earth for a whole flock of radio performers, got agents out scouring the woods for these kind of acts—calls them "hill billys" or something. Bringing up an all girl accordion band yet, and something called Uncle Hezzy's Barn Dance, which you can imagine.

This dame Mary won't even give me a tumble any more. When I found out the score on trying to collect my back pay from Fogle, I went around to see her and turned on the old charm a little. But like I said before, dames are ungrateful. What a freeze I got! She's so stuck-up, ever since the Martian females started this fad of imitating her, wearing copies of her spectacels with three lenses yet.

All right, let them have their fun. It won't last. It'll be just like on earth—once you get a hick audience started, they get educated up to better things. In a year or two this corny stuff will be dead, and they'll be crying for real class. Which I can give them.

Believe me, I didn't have any trouble getting a job. All I had to do was shine around to one of the carnivals and they grabbed me.

It's nothing fancy, but I got to make enough for my return fare, and I've never been afraid of trouping, you know that kid. Outfit I'm with plays a lot of burgs out in the sticks, but that's good experience. Only this business of eight performances a day sure can get you down when you're not used to it.

If I can just stick it out for a year or so, like I said, I'll really show them a few things —Fogle, those smart guys on *Variety*, everybody!

Your ever-loving

Bobby

P.S.: I BEEN thinking it over. I just come from doing another performance, and maybe I better not plan on any year up here.

Look, kid, if you could send

me the dough for my return fare, that's all I need. Once I get back to earth there's no problem—you know me, hottest act in the biz. I'll see that you get your money back right away. Just send it c/o General Delivery at Inport, because I'm heading out of this lousy carney tonight.

Between the two of us, I just can't take it any longer. Eight shows daily, yet! If you had to eat eight *gotch* a day, you'd know what I mean.

Bobby

∞ ∞ ∞

A Matter of Steps

Continued from page 3

We're on the way. And if the first vehicle has a crank instead of a self-starter, what of it?

Well—this of it. Science fiction can claim credit for a good many accurate predictions. It's worth noting, though, that science fiction is at its *best* in predicting the more sensational aspects . . . the major developments . . . the bangs. By and large, it's been no better than any other crystal ball at predicting the small beginnings . . . the whimpers.

Is this bad? No, definitely not! Science fiction can well afford to ignore the step-by-step details leading up to a new invention or discovery or new society for the sake of wider-ranging and more exciting stories. It should be conscious that these details exist, but it is under no obligation to describe them in a precise manner. In theory, it might attain greater realism by doing so; in practice, it merely becomes niggling and dull when it makes the attempt.

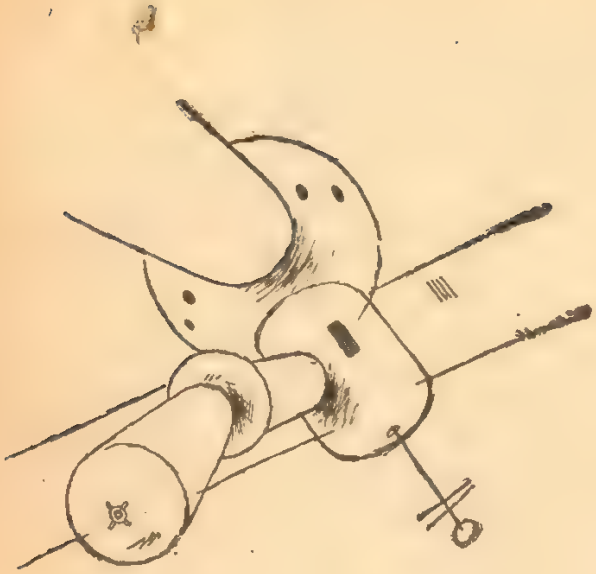
It's when science fiction becomes timid and short-sighted in its predictions and speculations that it suffers, not when its predictions and speculations are proved wrong by time.

At its best, science fiction thinks big. It can remain a distinct and worthwhile literary form only by continuing to do so.

This, incidentally, is the first issue of INFINITY SCIENCE FICTION. The people responsible for it like to think that it is starting with a bang instead of a whimper. But it will not be the function of these editorials to discuss the magazine itself. The contents speak for themselves, and you'll find out all you need to know about the editorial policy by reading them.

I will say this: By definition, anything not scientifically impossible can happen in infinity. Likewise, anything not scientifically impossible can happen in INFINITY SCIENCE FICTION—as long as it happens in a really good story.

The Editor.



A madman can be prevented from bomb-throwing —but a mad world?

KING OF THE HILL

by JAMES BLISH

Illustrated by GRIFFITH

IT DID COL. Hal Gascoigne no good whatsoever to know that he was the only man aboard Satellite Vehicle I. No good at all. He had stopped reminding himself of the fact some time back.

And now, as he sat sweating in the perfectly balanced air in front of the bombardier board, one of the men spoke to him again:

"Colonel, sir—"

Gascoigne swung around in the seat, and the sergeant—Gascoigne could almost remember the man's name—threw him a snappy Air Force salute.

"Well?"

"Bomb one is primed, sir. Your orders?"

"My orders?" Gascoigne said wonderingly. But the

Samuel Griffith

man was already gone. Gascoigne couldn't actually *see* the sergeant leave the control cabin, but he was no longer in it.

While he tried to remember, another voice rang in the cabin, as flat and razzy as all voices sound on an intercom.

"Radar room. On target."

A regular, meaningless peeping. The timing circuit had cut in.

Or had it? There was nobody in the radar room. There was nobody in the bomb hold, either. There had never been anybody on board SV-1 but Gascoigne, not since he had relieved Grinnell—and Grinnell had flown the station up here in the first place.

Then who had that sergeant been? His name was— It was—

The hammering of the teletype blanked it out. The noise was as loud as a pom-pom in the echoing metal cave. He got up and coasted across the deck to the machine, gliding in the gravity-free cabin with the ease of a man to whom free fall is almost second nature.

The teletype was silent by the time he reached it, and at first the tape looked blank. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes. There was the message.

MNBVCXZ LKJ HGFDS PYTR AOIU EUIO QPALZM

He got out his copy of "The Well-Tempered Pogo" and checked the speeches of Grundoon the Beaver-Chile for the key letter-sequence on which the code was based. There weren't very many choices. He had the clear in ten minutes.

BOMB ONE WASHINGTON 1700 HRS TAMMANANY

There it was. That was what he had been priming the bomb for. But there should have been earlier orders, giving him the go-ahead to prime. He began to rewind the paper.

It was all blank.

And—*Washington?* Why would the Joint Chiefs of Staff order him—

"Col. Gascoigne, sir—"

Gascoigne jerked around and returned the salute. "What's your name?" he snapped.

"Sweeney, sir," the corporal said. Actually it didn't sound very much like Sweeney, or like anything else; it was just a noise. Yet the man's face looked familiar. "Ready with bomb two, sir."

The corporal saluted, turned, took two steps, and faded. He did not vanish, but he did not go out the door, either. He simply receded, became darker and harder to distinguish, and was no longer there. It was as

though he and Gascoigne had disagreed about the effects of perspective in the glowing Earthlight, and Gascoigne had turned out to be wrong.

Numbly, he finished rewinding the paper. There was no doubt about it. There the order stood, black on yellow, as plain as plain. Bomb the capital of your own country at 1700 hours. Just incidentally, bomb your own home in the process, but don't give that a second thought. Be thorough, drop two bombs; don't worry about missing by a few seconds of arc and hitting Baltimore instead, or Silver Spring, or Milford, Del. CIG will give you the coordinates, but plaster the area anyhow. That's S.O.P.

With rubbery fingers, Gascoigne began to work the keys of the teletype. Sending on the frequency of Civilian Intelligence Group, he typed:

HELP SHOUT SERIOUS REPEAT SERIOUS PERSONNEL TROUBLE HERE STOP DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I CAN KEEP IT DOWN STOP URGENT GASCOIGNE SV ONE STOP

Behind him, the oscillator peeped rhythmically, timing the drive on the launching rack trunnion.

"Radar room. On target."

Gascoigne did not turn. He sat before the bombardier board and sweated in the perfectly balanced air. Inside his skull, his own voice was shouting:

STOP STOP STOP

THAT, as we reconstructed it afterwards, is how the SV-1 affair began. It was pure luck, I suppose, that Gascoigne sent his message direct to us. Civilian Intelligence Group is rarely called into an emergency when the emergency is just being born. Usually Washington tries to do the bailing job first. Then, when Washington discovers that the boat is still sinking, it passes the bailing can to us—usually with a demand that we transform it into a centrifugal pump, on the double.

We don't mind. Washington's failure to develop a government department similar in function to CIG is the reason why we're in business. The profits, of course, go to Affiliated Enterprises, Inc., the loose corporation of universities and industries which put up the money to build ULTIMAC—and ULTIMAC is, in turn, the reason why Washington comes running to CIG so often.

This time, however, it did not look like the big computer was going to be of much use

to us. I said as much to Joan Hadamard, our social sciences division chief, when I handed her the message.

"Um," she said. "*Personnel* trouble? What does he mean? He hasn't got any personnel on that station."

This was no news to me. CIG provided the figures that got the SV-1 into its orbit in the first place, and it was on our advice that it carried only one man. The crew of a space vessel either has to be large or it has to be a lone man; there is no intermediate choice. And SV-1 wasn't big enough to carry a large crew—not to carry them and keep the men from flying at each other's throats sooner or later, that is.

"He means himself," I said. "That's why I don't think this is a job for the computer. It's going to have to be played person-to-person. It's my bet that the man's responsibility-happy; that danger was always implicit in the one-man recommendation."

"The only decent solution is a full complement," Joan agreed. "Once the Pentagon can get enough money from Congress to build a big station."

"What puzzles me is, why did he call us instead of his superiors?"

"That's easy. We process his figures. He trusts us. The Pentagon thinks we're infallible, and he's caught the disease from them."

"That's bad," I said.

"I've never denied it."

"No, what I mean is that it's bad that he called us instead of going through channels. It means that the emergency is at least as bad as he says it is."

I thought about it another precious moment longer while Joan did some quick dialing. As everybody on Earth—with the possible exception of a few Tibetans—already knew, the man who rode SV-1 rode with three hydrogen bombs immediately under his feet—bombs which he could drop with great precision on any spot on the Earth. Gascoigne was, in effect, the sum total of American foreign policy; he might as well have had "Spatial Supremacy" stamped on his forehead.

"What does the Air Force say?" I asked Joan as she hung up.

"They say they're a little worried about Gascoigne. He's a very stable man, but they had to let him run a month over his normal replacement time—why, they don't explain. He's been turning in badly garbled reports over the

last week. They're thinking about giving him a dressing down."

"Thinking! They'd better be careful with that stuff, or they'll hurt themselves. Joan, somebody's going to have to go up there. I'll arrange fast transportation, and tell Gascoigne that help is coming. Who should go?"

"I don't have a recommendation," Joan said. "Better ask the computer."

I did so—on the double.

ULTIMAC said: *Harris.*

"Good luck, Peter," Joan said calmly. Too calmly.

"Yeah," I said. "Or good night."

EXACTLY WHAT I expected to happen as the ferry rocket approached SV-1, I don't now recall. I had decided that I couldn't carry a squad with me. If Gascoigne was really far gone, he wouldn't allow a group of men to disembark; one man, on the other hand, he might pass. But I suppose I did expect him to put up an argument first.

Nothing happened. He did not challenge the ferry, and he didn't answer hails. Contact with the station was made through the radar automatics, and I was put off on board as routinely as though I was being let into a movie—but a lot more rapidly.

The control room was dark and confusing, and at first I didn't see Gascoigne anywhere. The Earthlight coming through the observation port was brilliant, but beyond the edges of its path the darkness was almost absolute, broken only by the little stars of indicator lenses.

A faint snicking sound turned my eyes in the right direction. There was Gascoigne. He was hunched over the bombardier board, his back to me. In one hand he held a small tool resembling a ticket-punch. Its jaws were nibbling steadily at a taut line of tape running between two spools; that had been the sound I'd heard. I recognized the device without any trouble; it was a programmer.

But why hadn't Gascoigne heard me come in? I hadn't tried to sneak up on him, there is no quiet way to come through an airlock anyway. But the punch went on snicking steadily.

"Col. Gascoigne," I said. There was no answer. I took a step forward. "Col. Gascoigne, I'm Harris of CIG. What are you doing?"

The additional step did the trick. "Stay away from me," Gascoigne growled, from

somewhere way down in his chest. "I'm programming the bomb. Punching in the orders myself. Can't depend on my crew. Stay away."

"Give over for a minute. I want to talk to you."

"That's a new one," said Gascoigne, not moving. "Most of you guys were rushing to set up launchings before you even reported to me. Who the hell are you, anyhow? There's nobody on board, I know *that* well enough."

"I'm Peter Harris," I said. "From CIG—you called us, remember? You asked us to send help."

"Doesn't prove a thing. Tell me something I *don't* know. Then maybe I'll believe you exist. Otherwise—beat it."

"Nothing doing. Put down that punch."

Gascoigne straightened slowly and turned to look at me. "Well, you don't vanish, I'll give you that," he said. "What did you say your name was?"

"Harris. Here's my ID card."

Gascoigne took the plastic-coated card tentatively, and then removed his glasses and polished them. The gesture itself was perfectly ordinary, and wouldn't have surprised me—except that Gascoigne was not wearing glasses.

"It's hard to see in here," he complained. "Everything gets so steamed up. Hm. All right, you're real. What do you want?"

His finger touched a journal. Silently, the tape began to roll from one spool to another.

"Gascoigne, stop that thing. If you drop any bombs there'll be hell to pay. It's tense enough down below as it is. And there's no reason to bomb anybody."

"Plenty of reason," Gascoigne muttered. He turned toward the teletype, exposing to me for the first time a hip holster cradling a large, black automatic. I didn't doubt that he could draw it with fabulous rapidity, and put the bullets just where he wanted them to go. "I've got orders. There they are. See for yourself."

Cautiously, I sidled over to the teletype and looked. Except for Gascoigne's own message to CIG, and one from Joan Hadamard announcing that I was on my way, the paper was totally blank. There had been no other messages that day unless Gascoigne had changed the roll, and there was no reason why he should have. Those rolls last close to forever.

"When did this order come in?"

"This morning some time. I don't know. Sweeney!" he bawled suddenly, so loud that the paper tore in my hands. "When did that drop order come through?"

Nobody answered. But Gascoigne said almost at once, "There, you heard him."

"I didn't hear anything but you," I said, "and I'm going to stop that tape. Stand aside."

"Not a chance, Mister," Gascoigne said grimly. "The tape rides."

"Who's getting hit?"

"Washington," Gascoigne said, and passed his hand over his face. He appeared to have forgotten the imaginary spectacles.

"That's where your home is, isn't it?"

"It sure is," Gascoigne said. "It sure as hell is, Mister. Cute, isn't it?"

It was cute, all right. The Air Force boys at the Pentagon were going to be given about ten milliseconds to be sorry they'd refused to send a replacement for Gascoigne along with me. *Replace him with who? We can't send his second alternate in anything short of a week. The man has to have retraining, and the first alternate's in the hospital with a ruptured spleen. Besides, Gascoigne's the best man for the job; he's got to be bailed out somehow.*

Sure. With a psychological centrifugal pump, no doubt. In the meantime the tape kept right on running.

"YOU MIGHT as well stop wiping your face, and turn down the humidity instead," I said. "You've already smudged your glasses again."

"Glasses?" Gascoigne muttered. He moved slowly across the cabin, sailing upright like a sea-horse, to the blank glass of a closed port. I seriously doubted that he could see his reflection in it, but maybe he didn't really want to see it. "I messed them up, all right. Thanks." He went through the polishing routine again.

A man who thinks he is wearing glasses also thinks he can't see without them. I slid to the programmer and turned off the tape. I was between the spools and Gascoigne now —but I couldn't stay there forever.

"Let's talk a minute, Colonel," I said. "Surely it can't do any harm."

Gascoigne smiled, with a sort of childish craft. "I'll talk," he said. "Just as soon as you start that tape again. I was watching you in the mirror, *before* I took my glasses off."

The liar. I hadn't made a move while he'd been looking into that porthole. His poor pitiful weak old rheumy eyes had seen every move I made while he was polishing his "glasses." I shrugged and stepped away from the programmer.

"You start it," I said. "I won't take the responsibility."

"It's orders," Gascoigne said woodenly. He started the tape running again. "It's their responsibility. What did you want to talk to me about, anyhow?"

"Col. Gascoigne, have you ever killed anybody?"

He looked startled. "Yes, once I did," he said, almost eagerly. "I crashed a plane into a house. Killed the whole family. Walked away with nothing worse than a burned leg—good as new after a couple of muscle stabilizations. That's what made me shift from piloting to weapons; that leg's not quite good enough to fly with any more."

"Tough."

He snickered suddenly, explosively. "And now look at me," he said. "I'm going to kill my *own* family in a little while. And millions of other people. Maybe the whole world."

How long was "a little while"?

"What have you got against it?" I said.

"Against what—the world? Nothing. Not a damn thing. Look at me: I'm king of the hill up here. I can't complain."

He paused and licked his lips. "It was different when I was a kid," he said. "Not so dull, then. In those days you could get a real newspaper, that you could unfold for the first time yourself, and pick out what you wanted to read. Not like now, when the news comes to you predigested on a piece of paper out of your radio. That's what's the matter with it, if you ask me."

"What's the matter with what?"

"With the news—that's why it's always bad these days. Everything's had something done to it. The milk is homogenized, the bread is sliced, the cars steer themselves, the phonographs will produce sounds no musical instrument could make. Too much meddling, too many people who can't keep their hands off things. Ever fire a kiln?"

"Me?" I said, startled.

"No, I didn't think so. Nobody makes pottery these days. Not by hand. And if they did, who'd buy it? They don't want something that's been made. They want something that's been Done To."

The tape kept on traveling: Down below, there was a heavy rumble, difficult to identify specifically: something heavy being shifted on tracks, or maybe a freight lock opening.

"So now you're going to Do Something to the Earth," I said slowly.

"Not me. It's orders."

"Orders from inside, Col. Gascoigne. There's nothing on the spools." What else could I do? I didn't have time to take him through two years of psychoanalysis and bring him to his own insight. Besides, I'm not licensed to practice medicine—not on Earth. "I didn't want to say so, but I have to now."

"Say what?" Gascoigne said suspiciously. "That I'm crazy or something?"

"No. I didn't say that. You did," I pointed out. "But I will tell you that that stuff about not liking the world these days is baloney. Or rationalization, if you want a nicer word. You're carrying a screaming load of guilt, Colonel, whether you're aware of it or not."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Why don't you just beat it?"

"No. And you know well enough. You fell all over yourself to tell me about the family you killed in your flying accident." I gave him ten seconds of silence, and then shot the question at him as hard as I could. *"What was their name?"*

"How do I know? Sweeney or something. Anything. I don't remember."

"Sure you do. Do you think that killing your own family is going to bring the Sweeneys back to life?"

Gascoigne's mouth twisted, but he seemed to be entirely unaware of the grimace. "That's all hogwash," he said. "I never did hold with that psychological claptrap. It's you that's handing out the baloney, not me."

"Then why are you being so vituperative about it? Hogwash, claptrap, baloney—you are working awfully hard to knock it down, for a man who doesn't believe in it."

"Go away," he said sullenly. "I've got my orders. I'm obeying them."

Stalemate. But there was no such thing as stalemate up here. Defeat was the word.

THE TAPE traveled. I did not know what to do. The last bomb problem CIG had tackled had been one we had set up ourselves; we had arranged for a dud to be dropped in New York harbor, to test our

own facilities for speed in determining the nature of the missile. The situation on board SV-1 was completely different—

Whoa. Was it? Maybe I'd hit something there.

"Col. Gascoigne," I said slowly, "you might as well know now that it isn't going to work. Not even if you do get that bomb off."

"Yes, I can. What's to stop me?" He hooked one thumb in his belt, just above the holster, so that his fingertips rested on the breech of the automatic.

"Your bombs. They aren't alive."

Gascoigne laughed harshly and waved at the controls. "Tell that to the counter in the bomb hold. Go ahead. There's a meter you can read, right there on the bombardier board."

"Sure," I said. "The bombs are radioactive, all right. Have you ever checked their half-life?"

It was a long shot. Gascoigne was a weapons man; if it were possible to check half-life on board the SV-1, he would have checked it. But I didn't think it was possible.

"What would I do that for?"

"You wouldn't, being a loyal airman. You believe what your superiors tell you. But I'm a civilian, Colonel. There's no element in those bombs that will either fuse or fission. The half-life is too long for tritium or for lithium^{6}, and it's too short for uranium^{235} or radio-thorium. The stuff is probably strontium^{90}—in short, nothing but a bluff."

"By the time I finished checking that," Gascoigne said, "the bomb would be launched anyhow. And you haven't checked it, either. Try another tack."

"I don't need to. You don't have to believe me. We'll just sit here and wait for the bomb drop, and then the point will prove itself. After that, of course, you'll be court-martialed for firing a wild shot without orders. But since you're prepared to wipe out your own family, you won't mind a little thing like twenty years in the guardhouse."

Gascoigne looked at the silently rolling tape. "Sure," he said. "I've got the orders, anyhow. The same thing would happen if I didn't obey them. If nobody gets hurt, so much the better."

A sudden spasm of emotion —I took it to be grief, but I could have been wrong— shook his whole frame for a moment. Again, he did not seem to notice it. I said:

"That's right. Not even your family. Of course the whole world will know the station's a bluff, but if those are the orders—"

"I don't know," Gascoigne said harshly. "I don't know whether I even got any orders. I don't remember where I put them. Maybe they're not real." He looked at me confusedly, and his expression was frighteningly like that of a small boy making a confession.

"You know something?" he said. "I don't know what's real any more. I haven't been able to tell, ever since yesterday. I don't even know if you are real, or your ID card either. What do you think of that?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Nothing? Nothing! That's my trouble. Nothing! I can't tell what's nothing and what's something. You say the bombs are duds. All right. But what if *you're* the dud, and the bombs are real? Answer me that!"

His expression was almost triumphant now.

"The bombs are duds," I said. "And you've gone and steamed up your glasses again. Why don't you turn down the humidity, so you can see for three minutes hand running?"

Gascoigne leaned far forward, so far that he was perilously close to toppling, and peered directly into my face.

"Don't give me that," he said hoarsely. "Don't—give—me that—stuff."

I froze right where I was. Gascoigne watched my eyes for a while. Then, slowly, he put his hand on his forehead and began to wipe it downward. He smeared it over his face, in slow motion, all the way down to his chin.

Then he took the hand away and looked at it, as though it had just strangled him and he couldn't understand why. And finally he spoke.

"It—isn't true," he said dully. "I'm not wearing any glasses. Haven't worn glasses since I was ten. Not since I broke my last pair—playing King of the Hill."

He sat down before the bombardier board and put his head in his hands.

"You win," he said hoarsely. "I must be crazy as a loon. I don't know what I'm seeing and what I'm not. You better take this gun away. If I fired it I might even hit something."

"You're all right," I said. And I meant it; but I didn't waste any time all the same. The automatic first; then the

Continued on page 130

Sylvester Stallone

Farian jade was the most precious jewel in history—and the most deadly!

PHANTOM DUEL

By FORD McCORMACK

Illustrated by STALLMAN

WILL ARCHER idly poked one of the array of keys which studded the wings of his control chair. The pattern of stars which sprayed into a twelve-foot black bowl from a knobbed projector above his head winked out and was promptly replaced by the rounding, yellow-green bulk of Vega VII, less than two diameters away.

He was not sorry that its image was receding steadily. Faria, as it was called in the Vega system, was about the size of Earth and its atmosphere was tolerable to humans—there the resemblance all but ended. For its weather was insufferably hot, its topography fantastically tortuous, and its life-forms, both animal and vegetable—and yes, mineral!—were of a general aspect that only a biologist could gaze on with fondness.

In order to do so, a whole group of kindred scientists had come all the way from far Earth six months before, and had chartered a ship at the interstellar base on Vega IX.

They had also required an experienced and reliable "local" crew. The pay had been good, and Will Archer was looking forward to spending most of it quickly and freely on Vega IX.

He released the key and the screen automatically reoriented itself to primary position—on course. The stars showing before him were actually almost directly above his head, allowing for "yaw" due to offset angular acceleration.

Eighty hours to reversal. A hundred more of "descent" to Vega IX. Will Archer shrugged. Eight days between him and the fanciest fleshpots in the system. With a little more squirt—say about one-point-six G, which anybody but a cardiac case could easily stand—they could cut the trip in half, and sit down with juice to spare. But the freak-chasers loved comfort, and with all those specimens to drool over, they'd probably just as soon start for Sol III on chem-drive! Well, they or their sponsors were footing the bill, so—

The concave screen suddenly flickered to fifth position, showing a 120° range of the firmament, rotated 90° clockwise, to the pilot's left. At the same time, a buzzer started droning, and a yellow light blinked on the gauge panel to his right.

Toward one side of the screen, the great disc of Vega, selectively dimmed in projection, glowed like a blue-white moon. Near the center, a twelve-inch ring of light appeared and began to move slowly to the right. Whatever the ring indicated was too small and too distant to see, but to the unaided judgment its motion bore a disturbing resemblance to a collision course.

Evidently the detector-system thought otherwise, or a red light would be flashing instead of a yellow one, an all-quarters alarm-bell would be sounding instead of a buzzer, and the controls would have operated automatically to deflect the ship by a safe margin—or to the limit of its occupants' capacity to absorb shock. Fortunately, such instances were vanishingly rare: space is incredibly roomy.

Beneath the yellow blinker, a set of clicking meters recorded the flight components of the foreign object. Its direction cosines were changing slowly in a characteristically orbital manner; the object was probably a ship approaching the planet, although its velocity was a bit high for

this proximity. But that was another pilot's worry.

The ring was moving faster now, approaching the edge of the field. Just as it touched, it disappeared, and the screen flashed to first position. The ring reappeared at far left, shifted to the right with gathering speed. It swung past the center with a rush, slowed down again, and reached the far edge as the screen reoriented to third position. Very slowly now, the ring moved out from the left side of the field.

The nearest distance of the respective courses had been about 45 miles; of the ships themselves, about 70. The ring drifted on toward the center of the screen and seemed to hover there.

Will Archer looked back at the meters and shook his head. Too fast by far. And the negative acceleration was only a fraction of a G—*wait a minute!* He stared at the meter in question. Its reading was positive!

THAT MEANT the other ship, or whatever it might be, was approaching the planet in something resembling a free fall. A crash was not inevitable—there was plenty of time to apply sufficient lateral thrust to insure a miss—but *why?* Time and fuel would be wasted before a landing would become possible.

The meters stopped clicking, the buzzer became silent, and the ring disappeared from the screen, which changed back to first position. The object had passed beyond accurate range.

Will Archer frowned and pressed a key to his left. After a moment, the face of the radio operator appeared on a small video plate: "Yes?"

"Any calls from outside in the last few minutes?"

The radio operator looked surprised. "No. Why?"

"Stay on audio." The pilot pressed another key, and the buzzer began droning again. This time, it would be heard in all parts of the ship. Captain's call. After perhaps ten seconds, the broad, placid face of Captain Rogan appeared on the screen: "Will? What's the trouble?"

The captain rested his claim to respect on an amazing percentage of sound decisions, and held formality very lightly.

"Cap, a ship just crossed our course in what looked like a free fall to the planet—too fast for a landing. No signals of any kind."

Archer added nothing to the simple facts, since Cap-

tain Rogan was as well qualified to speculate about them as anyone. He knew that the Vega system harbors few, if any, meteorites of the indicated size. There is no asteroid belt; apparently there have never been more than the present twenty-three planets.

The only answer which seemed consistent with the facts was an ugly one. The object was a ship out of control — its occupants either dead or helpless.

CAPTAIN ROGAN'S furrowed brow indicated that he had reached the same conclusion.

"Modify thrust to hold course and cut acceleration," he said quietly. "I'll send Berry up to make the layout." The video plate blanked out.

Berry, the navigator, had turned in shortly after the fix and was probably asleep by now. Archer would need him —it was going to be tricky to plot a follow-course this close to the planet with enough leeway to match velocities. And they would have to pour it on a little, in all probability, to insure a safe margin—he wondered how the paying guests would like that. Not that it would matter to Captain Rogan—the Space Code came first.

Will Archer pressed a key, and a high-pitched gong began to sound at one-second intervals. It would warn the ship's occupants of a change in acceleration, and would continue until the change was completed.

Berry came in, walking quite steadily with the flat-footed gait of one wearing magnetic shoe-plates. He nodded sleepily, ran a hand through his tousled blond hair, and strapped his slight frame into the seat at the computing table.

"I can tell you right now," he said glumly, "it's going to be rough. At 3 G tops, it'll take five elements and seven hours, at the very least. We won't get within 50 percent of optimum."

Archer read between the lines. Berry was a confirmed pessimist, and if he specified seven hours, it meant there was a fair chance of overtaking the other ship in less.

On the trip "down," Will Archer did not mind the roller-coaster effects nearly so much as his gradual loss of orientation. It was not his first experience with incrementing a free descent, but it was by all odds his longest one. In succession, the planet was "up," "down," sideways and all over the place. Only

the screen remained relatively unconfused. Certainly no planet-evolved organism could hope to match its gyroscopic single-mindedness.

Some six hours later, the planet's projection occupied virtually the whole screen. The locator ring, now in shadow for contrast, picked out the other ship, which presently became visible as a black speck somewhat above the screen's center.

It grew, and became recognizable as a small ship of not more than six-man capacity. There was now little question of its being out of control—it was dropping toward the planet at an odd angle, and its jets were dead. The question was whether there would be sufficient thrust available to divert it from the planet's atmosphere. Unless power were applied within the next hour, Archer surmised, no reasonable amount of acceleration would do the trick.

Archer grinned. The same thing applied to this ship. How would the scientists react to the choice of jettisoning some of their heavy equipment and specimens or burdening their own frames with artificial avoirdupois to the point of black-out?

The final jockeying to match velocities was a delicate and nerve - wracking task, since overshooting even once would have meant considerable loss of time. There was a tense moment as they slid abreast of the smaller ship and Archer applied the last few pounds of thrust. It was precisely enough, and the two ships floated relatively motionless, though somewhat askew. The smaller ship showed no external signs of damage, yet no light showed through any of the visible portholes.

An extending rod, blackly silhouetted against the looming planet, stretched slowly across the field and touched the smaller ship's hull. Another moved out, farther away, and then a third, forming a magnetically clinging tripod which locked the two ships together.

The buzzer sounded intermittently and a blue light flashed on Archer's left. He flipped a key, and Captain Rogan's face appeared on the video plate.

"Will, get into your suit and come to the lock. Berry will take the controls. You're to go over with Stokely and see what can be done. And—better bring your gun, just in case."

It was a notion that had

already occurred to Archer, and he toyed with it further while donning his pressure-suit. People occasionally go berserk in space—its awe-some immensity affects some minds that way—and a few had been fairly successful in liquidating their fellows wholesale. Among those ships which had simply disappeared forever into the void, there were probably a few such cases. Yes, it was entirely possible that there might be one living occupant of the other ship—a madman.

STOKELY, the burly, pink-haired chief engineer, was dressed for space, except for his head-globe, when Archer arrived at the lock. So were two others: Evans, a soft-spoken, sharp-faced member of the crew, and a tall and graying individual whom Will recognized as Dr. Hubert Grimwood, one of the more eminent of the scientists aboard. A sizable medical kit was slung from the doctor's middle.

"I must admit, Captain," he was saying apologetically, "that while I do have a medical degree, I have never practised except—ah—incidentally."

Captain Rogan shrugged. "There's no other medical doctor aboard, as I told you. All you can do is your best."

The captain took up his position at the observation port next to the lock. "Are you ready, gentlemen?"

With the others, Archer slipped on his radio headset, placed his head-globe in its rubber gasket and tightened the four clamps that held it. He cracked the compressed-air valve just enough to inflate the suit gently, and turned on the regulator unit. As he stepped into the air-lock, the voice of Captain Rogan, slightly blurred in transmission, sounded in his ears:

"Stokely and Archer, being armed, will enter first. Stokely will report progress, if able —otherwise Archer, Evans, Grimwood, in that order. Please acknowledge."

The four men in the lock spoke their "Yes, sirs," in the order named, including Dr. Grimwood, whose response was nervously emphatic. He was plainly unaccustomed to activity during degravitation, but the set of his bony countenance showed his determination to go through with it.

Will Archer felt his suit stiffening as the gauge dropped toward zero, and he moved his arms and legs a little to test the ball joints. They moved freely, being precisely

pivoted so that the volume of the suit remained constant regardless of position. A moment later, Stokely pulled open the outer hatch.

One of the contact rods projected from its sheath near the hatch to a point within reach of the other ship's lock. Stokely set out carefully, hand over hand, and Archer followed him, gripping the rod firmly with each hand in turn. This was no time to make a slip and go drifting off into nowhere. The pistol at his side would provide a means of getting back, but an awkward one, because one's center of gravity was difficult to judge accurately, and if the shot were not closely aligned to it, one stood an excellent chance of converting himself into a human pinwheel.

Archer waited near the hull of the other ship until Stokely drew himself out of the way, then, grasping a nearby rung, he made room for Evans and Grimwood. Stokely, though a few feet away, was in dense shadow and almost invisible, but his flashlight made a shifting oval of light on what appeared to be a pane of vitreon, and he spoke steadily:

"I'm looking through the porthole, but I can't see much. There are no lights aboard ship. Nothing seems to be out of place in the waist here, but of course I can't see the nose and tail compartments."

"How about the lock?" came Captain Rogan's voice. "Try the emergency control."

Archer could feel a slight vibration through the hull as Stokely changed his position, then spoke again:

"Seems to be in working order. The lock is evacuating. But it's going to be a squeeze for the four of us."

"Better go in two at a time. You and Archer first . . . And keep your suits operating, even if the air reads all right—there just might be some fancy bacteria floating around."

That was another grim possibility not unknown in space annals. Bacteria could mutate rapidly and strangely under extra-planetary conditions. On two or three occasions, "fancy" ones had nearly wiped out orbital laboratories devoted to bacteriological research.

If such were the case here, it was all the more important to see what could be done to avoid tainting the atmosphere of an inhabited planet.

IN THE AIR LOCK, the pressure balanced quickly with that of the interior, and

the tension eased on the fabric of their suits. Stokely pushed the inner hatch open and they entered with guns drawn. The beams of their flashlights swept the chamber quickly, then more slowly.

There were only the bunks, storage lockers, air-processing equipment, and gyro-stabilizer unit to be expected amidships of such a craft. Stokely placed a hand on the stabilizer housing for a moment, then nodded. They had already judged from the ship's behavior that it must be functioning.

"Nothing out of the way here," reported Stokely in a low voice.

"Stay together, and look at the control room first," Captain Rogan ordered.

There was, of course, no central lift in a ship this size, but merely narrow ladders between the compartments. These were necessary only under the pull of gravity or acceleration, and under the present circumstances, to be avoided. Stokely led the way "up" the inner hull and across the "overhead," placing his magnetized boots as softly as possible.

The inter-compartment hatch, about three feet in diameter, was wide open. Stokely pointed at Archer's flashlight and made a fanlike motion with his hands. Archer nodded, reached out and aimed the light through the hole, full flood, while Stokely peered through the other side, gun in hand. The stratagem was simple—anyone firing at the light might hit Archer's arm, but probably not Stokely's less expendable head.

Nothing happened. After a tense moment, Archer moved the light about slowly, then Stokely turned his own over the edge.

"There are two men in there," he said slowly. "Both dead, I think."

THERE WAS no doubt at all about one of them, whose corpse floated not six feet away, tied by one wrist to a conduit. Part of the face seemed to have been gouged out, and closer inspection showed the explanation: a sizable bullet-hole in the opposite temple.

Whether or not the other was dead, he was certainly not conscious, despite his normal sitting posture in the control chair. That was to be expected anyhow, in a free fall with the safety belt fastened. His squat frame was stripped to the waist, his small black eyes stared blindly, and his unshaven jaw was clenched in

an ugly grin. His right hand loosely held a hypodermic syringe, and a pistol was stuck in his belt.

Stokely gave a brief description, and added: "He looks dead, all right. Maybe he tried to give himself an anti-tetanus injection, but was too late."

"Dr. Grimwood will please go in immediately," said Captain Rogan. "In the meantime, Stokely and Archer will look at the tail compartment."

The tail, or engine, compartment contained nothing of abnormal interest, as it turned out. The ship appeared to be in running order, with adequate fuel. Its power had evidently been cut deliberately, for whatever mysterious reason.

"Stokely will remain there," said Captain Rogan. "Archer will take the controls. We are withdrawing the contact rods, and will retard our fall, giving you enough clearance to align ship and test the power. If everything functions normally, the four of you will proceed to company base on Faria. Dr. Grimwood will exercise his judgment as to whether to remove your pressure-suits. Archer, as pilot, will take command."

Dr. Grimwood and Evans had removed the dead man from the control seat when Archer returned. The controls were fewer and less specialized, and in place of the all-seeing projection screen was a televiewer plate with fixed scanners, whose field was limited to the tailward sector of the heavens. Other observation was necessarily direct, through the several ports.

The televiewer became activated at the flip of the switch and revealed that Captain Rogan had withdrawn his ship to a safe distance.

Will Archer depressed a key which had the effect of applying a magnetic brake in the stabilizer unit to one of a pair of oppositely rotating flywheels, or "gyrotors," whose axis was athwartship. As the considerable speed of the gyrotor diminished, the ship began to turn with it in a slow somersault. Archer eased up on the key, and after some hundred and twenty degrees, released it. The gyrotor came up to speed again, stopping the spin nicely.

Archer paused with his hand on the power control. "Hang on, boys," he said. "There's going to be a floor."

The others got as close to it as they could, and Archer "raised" the thrust-control lever a few notches. Immediately, there was the welcome

feeling of weight. This, as a dubious tribute to the adaptability of human flesh, became oppressive before the accelerometer showed one G.

"We're going to have to pour it on," said Archer. "Three G's for a safe margin. Since there's only one other chair here, maybe Evans had better go down with Stokely. There are two chairs there. And by the way, I think our two silent partners would be better off in the main storage compartment."

"Particularly," agreed Dr. Grimwood, "as they appear to have been dead two or three days. That would be one reason for keeping our suits on for a while." Gingerly, he picked up the hypodermic syringe from beside the sprawling corpse.

"It would be interesting to know what was in this. Maybe—" The doctor stooped again quickly. "But what's this?"

Will Archer looked down in time to see him force open the dead man's clenched left fist. As the fingers came back, a greenish, glowing object the size and shape of a brazil nut lay exposed. Or was it green? All the colors of the spectrum seemed to appear in flickering succession as Dr. Grimwood picked it up almost reverently, yet the predominant effect was of cold green fire.

After a moment, the doctor spoke softly: "So that's it! Farian jade!"

"Farian jade!" Archer echoed. "I've heard of it. Plenty valuable, isn't it?"

Dr. Grimwood nodded. "Fabulously. There are only a few hundred pieces known to exist, and their combined value could purchase a fair-sized, habitable planet!"

Evan's normally wide, dark eyes were bulging myopically. "Do you think these guys stole it?"

"Hard to say," said the doctor. "But, putting two and two together, it looks more like they made a find somewhere back on the planet. If so, there should be more of the stuff around, or some information—" He felt about in the dead man's clothing, and presently pulled some papers from an inner pocket.

"Here we are!" he said, unfolding them. "The Farian coordinates, a rough topographical map of the region, and written directions. They must have struck it rich—a find of only a dozen pieces could be worth twenty million dollars. They possibly decided to take out only a few pieces at a time and pass them off as stolen goods elsewhere in the sys-

tem, legal protection being of dubious effectiveness where Farian jade is involved. But it was evidently too big a strike for their psyches to withstand."

Stokely stepped from the open hatch, his eyes fixed on the jewel in Dr. Grimwood's hand. He reached for it, held it up and studied it at several angles, then passed it back, his face inscrutable throughout the actions.

"It's about the only gem that can't be synthesized, isn't it?" he asked the doctor.

"Yes—that's the main reason for its enormous value. And it's my guess that it couldn't be synthesized for a long time even if we knew a lot more about it than we do. The reason we don't know much is absurdly simple: the stuff is just too damned expensive for a mere scientist to be permitted more than superficial analysis. But we do know this: synthesizing it would be tantamount to creating life."

"Don't look now," Will Archer interrupted calmly, "but there's a sizable planet breathing down our necks. So if you gentlemen would retire to your respective stations, I can guarantee to add considerable weight to the discussion."

"NOT THAT the stuff is really alive, in any accepted sense," Dr. Grimwood went on a few minutes later, his breathing somewhat labored, but his enthusiasm not altogether squelched by three hundred and fifty added pounds. "But it certainly isn't jade at all, or anything similar. That misnomer has stuck because of its greenish glow—although if you examine it under a very strong light, it appears dead black. Actually, it's a microbiotic crystalline formation, the result of some age-long process believed to be conducted by a virus-like life-form. The 'jade' itself seems to be a borderline structure, having no obvious properties of life—yet there is the contradictory cold light, or bioluminescence, which would indicate some degree of electrochemical change. I'm not a bio-chemist myself, but I'll tell you there are one or two fellows on the other ship who would cut all our throats, in a charmingly objective manner, in order to lay their hands on this bauble. Some think that Farian jade may very possibly hold the secret of life itself."

With an effort, the doctor lifted his hand high enough so that, without altering his reclining position, he could

peer over his own chin at the jewel. Archer found his eyes held by it almost hypnotically, as it pulsated through the gamut of hues, now blending, now contrasting with the dominant green.

"From what I've heard," said Archer, "the virus, or whatever makes it, is pretty deadly to humans. Is it true that you can't even tell you're infected until the final convulsions?"

"In effect, yes," replied Dr. Grimwood. "Although if you're exposed to it, which means stumbling across one of the rare and unpredictable localities where the jade is found, the chances are about four out of five that you will be infected. The fifth person, for some inexcusably unknown reason, seems to be immune. But there is one symptom that occurs with some punctuality three and a half hours after exposure, and about 15 minutes before the convulsions: it's a bodily glow, or aura, due to some bioluminescent substance saturating the tissues.

"However, it is so faint that it can be seen only in the dark, and then not by the victim himself, since it shows up only in contrast to a dark background. I think that is the explanation of the fact that we found all the lights out when we boarded this ship."

"You mean," said Archer, with some alarm, "that fellow might have died of the virus infection—in this chair?"

Dr. Grimwood smiled slightly. "Don't worry. In the first place, he didn't have it—he only thought he did. And if he had, you couldn't catch it, even minus your pressure-suit. The malady is not transmissible among humans. I almost wish it were, since we would have been obliged to learn a great deal more about it than we have."

"You say he thought he had it—was the stuff in the hypodermic some kind of antidote, then?"

"Undoubtedly," said the doctor. "And since there is only one antidote known, it explains what happened to the rest of the jade they brought along."

"That's right!" exclaimed Archer. "I remember having heard that now. The jade itself is the only antidote. But then—why did he die?"

"Because," said Dr. Grimwood, "the antitoxin, where the infection has not occurred, is a deadly and swift poison."

THE DOCTOR PAUSED, then spoke bitterly: "There is some reason for believing that

the jade, or end-product, might be rendered non-toxic in itself—if it were obtainable for experimentation. But it's not. They'll inject the stuff in their own skins to save same—one wealthy woman even mixed herself a million-dollar martini in order to commit suicide—but when it comes to turning over the smallest fragment to a laboratory, even billionaire philanthropists are restrained by their wives. And the specimens are never cut or ground since it wouldn't enhance their luminescence, so there aren't even any scraps for the hungry researcher.

"Anyhow, my guess is that these prospectors started off with their samples not too long after exposure. They could have been well out of the atmosphere before the three-and-a-half hour deadline. As it approached, they evidently killed the lights in order to watch each other for the symptomatic aura. Even though the probability was pretty high of at least one of them being infected, they most likely wouldn't have prepared any of the precious solution in advance. Fortunately, it doesn't take long—you merely dissolve a minimum of ten carats in a little alcohol, and it's ready to inject.

"The fellow who was later killed must have developed the aura and been told about it in good faith, because I saw the needle-mark on his arm. Then came trouble. The other fellow happened to be one of the 20 percent minority who are immune. He failed to show the symptom, but suspected his colleague of lying about it. He probably kept him covered with his gun while he cut the power so that even the control lights would be out. Then he tried to tell by the reflection of his naked torso in the observation ports whether he had the fatal glow. It must have been a tense and ironic situation.

"Whether he was deceived by a diffusion of sunlight in the heavy vitreon or by his own taut nervous system, he evidently fancied he saw the aura, and shot his comrade in a fit of rage. Then he turned the equally fatal hypodermic on himself."

ALTHOUGH the four men were still in radio contact, having decided to keep their pressure-suits on until the air "cleared," nobody spoke for a while. Archer lolled his leaden cranium sideways on its rest, to see the rim of the planet looming hugely in the side ports. The ship would be

reaching the near-point in another hour.

"They must have been pushing off at well over two G," he said, "for their momentum to have carried them out as far as it did. They made a big loop."

Dr. Grimwood smiled wryly. "I imagine they were impatient. How would you feel with a negotiable fortune as a cargo?"

"You might say," returned Archer, "how *do* I feel? That leftover you're holding must be 30 or 40 carats. I'll be glad enough to turn it over to the company and let them find out about salvage rights, if any. Frankly, I'm just a little afraid of the stuff. Its value seems to be of slightly lethal proportions."

"True," sighed the doctor, "but there's a great temptation to stop off at that find and sneak a hunk of it for some friends of mine. They'd get a bigger kick out of pulverizing it with a mallet than they would buying castles on Arcturus IV."

Under the onus of triple weight, the hour that followed seemed much longer. At last the ship cleared the dangerous fringe of atmosphere by a good thousand miles, and Archer aimed her nose at the retreating rim of the planet, reducing deceleration to a very tolerable 1.5 G.

"We'll swing pretty wide," he said to the others. "It'll be nine or ten hours before we get back in at a safe speed. If you fellows don't mind, I'm going to shuck this suit and catch a nap right here in this chair. I'm all in. I'd advise you, Stokely, to do the same. We may need to be on our toes later—this job won't practically land itself like the one we're used to!"

A FEW HOURS later, Will Archer was pacing a broad marble courtyard inlaid with Farian jade, in a kingly castle on Arcturus IV, when a rough hand on his shoulder shook him awake. It was Stokely, with his gun in his hand and an ugly smile on his rather handsome, freckled face. He motioned derisively toward Dr. Grimwood, who was bound securely to his chair.

"I can't figure the doctor out," said Stokely. "I thought he made a wonderful suggestion about stopping off and picking up some more jade, but now that I've invited him, he doesn't want to go."

Archer had discarded his own gun with his pressure-suit and was chagrined to see it now in its holster at Stokely's waist. He groaned in-

wardly, cursing his sleeping intuition for not having warned him. In looking back, he realized now that there had been more to Stokely's reactions than mere awe at the sight of a fabulous gem. And there was something else—Stokely, though a first-rate engineer, had been washed out as a Space Guard cadet on psychological grounds. He was quite sane, but too individualistic—his social and cooperative indices had been low. Captain Rogan had known of his record, of course—but he had not known what would be found on this ship, and what effect it would have on Stokely.

But what about Evans? Archer turned in his chair and saw the slightly built man standing a little nervously in back of him, holding what must be the dead prospector's gun.

Archer bit his lip. Not much was known of Evans, since he had been with them only two trips, and his responsibilities as an ordinary crewman had not been great. Archer judged him as a none-too-bright individual who would never undertake such a bold venture on his own initiative, but who might go to considerable lengths under strong leadership. Well, he had that in Stokely, whose pale blue eyes had a reckless and determined look about them.

"Are you with us?" demanded Stokely. "I could probably pull this off without you, but it'll be easier with you. Because you're a damned good pilot even if you are the Captain's fair-haired boy. What do you say? Not that we'll trust you very far, either way. Evans and I keep the guns. You'll have to string along part way, anyhow—if you want to come all the way, there's a fortune in it for you."

Archer unsnapped his safety belt and got to his feet, flexing his lean limbs, which were cramped from the many hours of confinement. As he faced Stokely, their eyes were on a level, although the pink-haired man would have run a good 30 pounds heavier—or, at the moment, 45.

"What guarantee," asked Archer in a dull voice, "would I have of that?"

"My say so, mostly," Stokely admitted evenly. "But I can use a pilot, not only now but later. After we grab the stuff, the first thing we'll need is another ship—and Faria won't be the place to look for it. When we get it, we'll get rid of this one. That's where you come in."

"How do you plan to do it?"

"Very simple. Charge it up to the hilt, set her course straight out of the system and let her go at about two G. It won't come back for a thousand years, at least. The company will figure something happened to it on this trip after we managed to miss the planet, and we couldn't get back. I thought of cracking it up on Faria, but somebody might spot it hitting the air, and the time would be way off. This way is better—we just got lost in space. With nobody looking for us on IX, it'll be a cinch to get out of the system from the interstellar base.

"After that—we can go buy that nice planet the doctor was talking about."

ARCHER scarcely heard the latter part of Stokely's speech, except to visualize briefly the ironic situation in which a pilot named Archer would change ships in midspace—or start to. The important question was whether there was anything to be gained by pretending to throw in with the conspirators. Stokely, like most people who find it difficult to appreciate a different viewpoint, should be easy enough to deceive. It might mean a gain of considerable time—for Archer.

But what about Dr. Grimwood? There seemed to be no place for him in Stokely's scheme, after locating the jade, except perhaps the storage compartment with the two prospectors. Once Stokely had disposed of the doctor, he would undoubtedly require less of an excuse to do the same with Archer—and eventually Evans, in all probability.

There was a chance, however, that if Stokely found himself stoutly opposed by both Dr. Grimwood and Archer, he might hesitate to kill them both out of hand, at least until he could be certain of finding the jade deposit. Double murder is a long step for a man with no previous criminal record.

Archer made his decision.

"You can count me out," he said flatly, watching Stokely's face for a reaction. "That badlands where the find is supposed to be is a tough place to land a ship, so I'll put her down on behalf of all of us—but also on the condition that you'll release Dr. Grimwood and myself immediately. It'll take us weeks to reach civilization, *if* we're lucky. That ought to give you all the time you need. But I want your

guarantee — otherwise, I'll have nothing to lose by trying to cross you up, if it kills us all."

The bluff evidently carried a certain amount of purely psychological weight, for Stokely seemed a little taken aback, and his blustering smile lacked full confidence.

"Honest Will Archer!" he said scornfully. "The pride of the company! You're in a hell of a position to bargain!" He went on in a more serious tone: "But it sounds good enough. You get us down, the doctor helps us find the jade—he's the only one who knows much about the stuff—and then the two of you can start out. Who knows—you might even make it!" He grinned.

It sounded as if—at the moment—Stokely regarded the proposition as an easy way out for himself. For Archer and the doctor, it would not be so easy. There would be at least two hundred miles of fearfully rugged terrain, infested by predatory and poisonous animals, insects and plants. It would be both hot and dangerous to travel by day — and downright foolhardy by night. And even this dim prospect depended on the slight scruples of a thoroughly egocentric individual.

It was not enough. Archer resolved to keep his faculties on the alert for any loophole that might occur.

BUT STOKELY'S vigilance had not slackened when, hours later, they approached the atmosphere at a speed slightly greater than that of the planet's rotation, and within an estimated five hundred miles of the coordinates shown on the dead men's chart. Stokely left Evans in Dr. Grimwood's chair, with the strict injunction not to remove his eyes from Archer, and took the doctor with him to the engine compartment.

Thereafter, Archer was obliged to give his entire attention to the business of angling the ship sharply into the atmosphere and opposing its thrust to the resultant of deceleration, gravity and air resistance, a function which was only semi-automatic, and needed constant correction.

The first landmark shown on the map, a jagged and mighty canyon, presently appeared between scattered clouds below. Archer set the ship's angle nearer to the horizontal, allowing gravity to pull it into a steeper descent.

The next landmark, a crescent-shaped range of sawtooth mountains near the far end of the canyon, showed up plainly,

since shadows were lengthening across the face of the planet. A dozen valleys meandered off from the hills in a southerly direction and Archer aimed for the fourth from the south.

At last, one third of its length from the south end of the valley, the ship stood over the spot corresponding to the X-mark on the map and settled slowly on its jets. According to the scrawled notation, the jade deposit would be not more than half a mile away, near the valley's east wall.

Archer delayed the impatient Stokely long enough to provide Dr. Grimwood and himself with packs of food and water from the ship's stores, trading on the doctor's promise to help locate the jade. Once it was found, Archer did not intend to remain at Stokely's mercy long enough to return to the ship.

All four of the men donned their pressure-suits, primarily as a barrier against the deadly "jade" virus, but incidentally as a protection from all manner of unpleasant insects and tentacular, s t i n g i n g plants. Also, there was an abundance of scurrying, cold-blooded little horrors, reminiscent of Terran reptiles or batrachians, but by those standards grotesquely misshapen.

Vega VII was a planet whose surface had been prematurely desiccated by a broiling sun, although there was still considerable water available in underground lakes, but the excess of hard radiation had s p u r r e d evolutionary processes to improbable extremes.

Just now, the outsized, glaring white orb was low in the sky and the temperature was becoming tolerable. Before morning, in this dry air, it would probably drop far below freezing.

STOKELY MADE Archer and the doctor walk ahead, at a difficult pace over the rough ground. They went willingly, however, since failure to find the jade in the next hour or so would mean spending the whole night in untrustworthy company.

The final fixing of the location was accomplished by aligning the tip of a rocky promontory resembling a human nose with a farther peak and walking directly away from it until a small ravine was encountered. The deposit was 75 yards farther on, according to the instructions, in a direction a little south of east. All four men paced it off with extended strides, ending up in a scattered configura-

tion, with no two of them more than ten yards apart.

THE MEN FACED each other and looked about. It was a rock-strewn area similar to a dozen others they had passed through on the way here. But closer inspection revealed one difference. Here and there were piles of dry, gray bones of different sizes, some of them crumbled almost into dust.

"Looks something like an animal graveyard," said Dr. Grimwood. "But I rather imagine it's less purposeful than that, and most of them simply made the mistake of sleeping here."

"Well," said Stokely, his voice harsh and a trifle high-pitched, "where's the jade?"

He deliberately pointed his gun at the doctor, who regarded him dubiously.

"I'm sure it's here," said Dr. Grimwood, "but I really don't know much about its appearance in the natural state. They carefully avoided any mention of that on their map, you know. That map was intended for them alone." The doctor began to walk slowly among the rocks, studying them. "I seem to recall, though, hearing something about—"

He paused, bent down slowly with the weight of his pack, and dug with his space-gauntleted fingers at a hollow in one of the larger rocks.

"—m o s s !" he finished. "Gray moss. I think this is it."

The tufted moss was hardly distinguishable from the stone itself in the waning light. Dr. Grimwood plucked from its core a thimble-sized lump. Holding it up, he scraped away part of the gray coating. It was as if, with some magic flint, he had struck green fire. The eerie glow of the gem made the surrounding area seem suddenly darker by contrast.

Will Archer only glanced at it, returning his gaze quickly to Stokely, on his left. In the big man's reaction to this climactic discovery might lie some clue to his probable course of action.

And the expression on Stokely's face was not good to see. The pale eyes which had widened at the first sight of the gem now narrowed to slits, while his normally regular features pulled into an ugly mask. A dark flush suffused his freckled cheeks.

Archer watched him with growing alarm. There was little doubt that, for the moment, Stokely was not sane.

His gun, still pointed at

Dr. Grimwood, moved slightly, and Archer saw his finger tightening on the trigger. In one motion, Archer slipped free of his pack and flung himself at the heavier man.

The gun went off just as he struck, and Stokely, caught off guard, was bowled over like a tenpin. His head-globe hit hard against the rocky ground, protecting his head but smashing a large hole in the globe.

He went over so easily that Archer himself was thrown off balance. He stumbled over Stokely's legs and fell a few feet beyond. Rolling over quickly, he scrambled to a crouching position, then paused, and drew himself slowly erect.

Evans was standing just beyond Stokely, and the gun in his hand was aimed steadily at Archer's stomach. Dr. Grimwood was lying prone and limp, his blood trickling out between the stones under him, the bit of jade glinting near his outstretched hand.

Stokely picked up his gun and got to his feet dazedly, shaking his head to clear it. Archer studied his face and saw there a vast, rising anger, but no longer the wild light of utter unreason. The man was in a dangerous mood and might readily kill again, but he had evidently been jolted back to a semblance of sanity.

Suddenly, Stokely's eyes widened and fear became dominant in his expression. He obviously had just realized the implication of the fact that his head-globe was broken. He licked his lips, and looked back and forth from Archer to Evans.

His mouth tightened with sudden purpose.

"Evans! Look out!" Archer shouted, but too late.

Stokely had lashed out with his gun and caught Evans sharply on the right wrist. As Evans' gun dropped from paralyzed fingers, Stokely easily shoved him away and scooped it up from the ground. He stepped back a few paces, keeping a watchful eye on Archer.

"Okay," he ordered Evans grimly, "take it off!"

ONLY THEN, evidently, did Evans' slow wits grasp the meaning of what had happened. His dark eyes stared with fright, but he loosened the clamps with trembling fingers, and set his head-globe carefully on the ground. Stokely, now in possession of all three guns, holstered the one in his left hand, removed his cracked head-globe with some difficulty, and even more

awkwardly replaced it with Evans'.

Head-globes were interchangeable, though the individually proportioned suits were not. The reason that Stokely had called upon Evans, not Archer, to remove his globe was disturbingly obvious. Stokely wanted Evans in the same status as himself, for the time being—which should have been reassuring to Evans. To Archer it was quite the contrary, and he was not surprised when Stokely scowled at him a moment later and spoke in a voice that was too quiet:

"As for you, you're too smart for your own good. I don't think we need you around any longer." The gun in his right hand swung slowly.

"On the contrary," said Archer quickly, "since that borrowed helmet might not make any difference now, you need me worse than ever. That is, unless you trust each other implicitly." He spoke the last few words with slow emphasis.

For a long moment, the gun held steady, then it lowered a little. Stokely gestured with the other hand.

"Take it off," he said harshly, "and I'll hear what you have to say. I'm not promising anything, though. For instance—why should I trust *you*?"

Archer removed his headglobe, admitting the outer air. It was cold against his face, and so dry by comparison with the humidified air of his pressure-suit that it caught in his throat as he breathed. He left his headset on for communication with Stokely.

"Maybe you won't have to," Archer answered steadily. "I have a plan that might work in spite of our low regard for each other's veracity. But—in case it doesn't—you'll be better off if you take off that globe."

Stokely sneered. "You'll have a hard time selling me that idea!"

"I don't think so, when you see the point. You're forgetting that in this case, a false cure is just as deadly as the disease. I don't know just how full of the virus the air is hereabouts, but as far as either of us can tell, you may be cutting down your chances of getting infected. Evans' chance, and mine, with full exposure, will be four out of five. That means if we can't find out for sure whether we have it, we can take an injection and be 80 percent sure of being right.

"How sure can you be?"

Stokely's face set in a grim mask as the realization sank in. He removed his globe and set it out before him on the ground. Again the gun raised to Archer's chest.

"Okay, bright lad, you put it on!"

Archer smiled thinly and shook his head. "Could you be sure that I don't know more about the infection than I've admitted? In which case, it might be a trick to get the globe for myself."

Stokely's face was twisting dangerously again, and Archer went on quickly:

"Better leave us all in the same boat, anyhow—it'll work out better later on."

It was a full, tense minute before Stokely's fury subsided to a point where he could speak.

"I think I'm making a mistake in letting you live," he said thickly. "This plan of yours had better be good. How does it work—with mirrors? Let's have it!"

"Lacking mirrors of a size which would show a good contrast—say about ten feet square," Archer returned calmly, "we'll have to use other means. My plan will give each of us an equal chance, at least. I'll tell you the first part now: we take all the jade we can find around here, before dark if possible, and go back to the ship. I'll tell you the next step when we get there. If that isn't good enough—or if an 80 percent chance *is*—you can shoot and be damned!"

IT WAS NEARLY three hours later, very dark and very cold, when they returned to the ship. Archer and Evans carried Dr. Grimwood's body, consigned to the same storage compartment as the dead prospector's. Stokely evidently had not altogether abandoned his original plan for disposing of the evidence. The question now, Archer thought grimly, was how many bodies there would be.

Stokely himself carried the jade, of course. Under his prodding, they had literally left no stone unturned in the vicinity of the deposit. It had yielded nine pieces of varying size and a total weight of perhaps a hundred and fifty carats. They added up to riches beyond imagining.

One of the lockers, as would be expected aboard a prospector's ship, contained an assortment of standard chemicals, and Archer lost no time in locating a bottle of ethyl alcohol. There was also a balance and a set of weights.

"The next step is simple,"

he said, anticipating Stokely's question. "I make up a solution of antitoxin. There are hypodermics in the medical kit, which is in the control room. The doctor put the one we found up there in it, and I'm pretty sure I noticed a couple of others. Perhaps you will trust Evans to go get it, and in the meantime, I'll trouble you for about 30 carats of jade."

"Thirty carats! That's enough for all three of us! We may not all be infected."

"No—as a matter of fact the odds work out to be only a little better than 50-50 that we all have it. But we've all got to have the means of doing something about it if we find out—otherwise the plan won't work.

"*If* we find out!" Stokely echoed harshly. "Archer, you've stalled around long enough! What is this plan?"

Archer looked at him in open disgust. "*You've* stalled around long enough! There's only 20 more minutes until the three-and-a-half hour deadline. Let me get the stuff made and then we'll talk about it. Incidentally, 30 carats is less than the share you offered me—and also a lot less than I value my life. So you can figure the shots are on me."

With a reluctant grimace, Stokely removed the utility kit from his belt and poured out a small but dazzling cascade. Archer weighed several combinations of the smaller gems, and found one group of three which came to a little under six and a half grams or about 32 carats.

Unceremoniously, he dumped them into a small beaker, and poured in a little alcohol. After a minute or so, they softened and dissolved. Archer added distilled water and stirred the solution gently.

Evans returned from the control room and handed the medical kit to Archer, who took out the three hypodermics. Forcing himself to take great pains, he divided the solution among the three.

"No time to sterilize these," he said. "Not that they should need it. Here is the one used by the dead man—I don't mind taking it, if anybody else does. This next one has a little more in it than the others. Stokely, you're the biggest, so—but suit yourself. Now let's get these suits off and get outside."

"Why can't we wear the suits?" asked Evans. "It's freezing out there!"

"Because they're opaque," said Archer patiently, "and

the aura is so faint that your cranium alone probably wouldn't give off enough to be visible. Personally, I'm going to strip to the waist. I'd be inclined to strip further, if it weren't for the fact that some of those crawling things out there are about as deadly as the virus."

IN SILENCE, the three men climbed down from the airlock, their flashlights cutting holes in the thick darkness. Faria was a moonless planet, and the hour was late.

Under the watchful eye of Stokely, Archer walked clear of the retractable landing supports and shone his flashlight about the small level area in which the ship was fairly centered. He held the beam steady on an outcropping of rock about 40 feet away.

"There's a good background for you, Stokely. It faces the lock, and I imagine you'll want to do the same."

He swung the flashlight slowly around. There were several piles of boulders standing about, and Archer indicated two of them, each about 120 degrees from the first.

"Evans and I can take those two positions. That way we'll form a triangle, each of us about 40 feet from the ship, and in plain sight of the others—that is, *if* we develop that fatal glow. In any case, Stokely, I think you can depend on us staying put until we find out, since—"

"And then what happens?" Stokely demanded impatiently. "How do we find out—without trusting each other? The whole set-up sounds silly to me!"

"It's my life, too," Archer reminded him. "And in case you're in any doubt, I don't trust you, either. Here's the plan: As you know, all of us were exposed within a very few minutes of each other. That means, according to our late friend, the doctor, that in ten to 12 minutes from now—perhaps a few minutes longer—one or more of us should show the symptomatic aura.

"Now there's the point: *one or more* of us. There's an excellent chance we won't all show it. Allowing an adequate margin, the next 20 minutes should reveal who has the infection and who hasn't. I propose that at the end of that time each of us in turn announces, not which of the others shows it but simply whether he sees the aura at all. He doesn't tell whether one or both of the others

shows it, but merely whether *at least one* does."

"What good would that do anybody?" asked Stokely glumly.

"None, in itself. But you forget that all of us will be reporting. For instance, supposing Evans says he sees it, but I don't show it, or vice versa—two very distinct possibilities. Then you'd know that the only place Evans could have seen it—"

"What if he were lying?" Stokely put in sharply.

"That's the general idea in back of the whole scheme. He couldn't get away with it. If he said he saw it and didn't, it could only mean that neither you nor I showed it. In that case—which is one of the lesser possibilities, incidentally—I'd be led into the same error that you would. But it would then be very much to our mutual benefit to compare notes before taking any injection.

"If he said he didn't see it, and either of us had it, the other would know he was lying. If we can't trust each other to tell the truth, we can't very well depend on each other to back up our lies—especially when there is everything to lose by it. If you knew Evans was lying about me, how would you know whether he was telling the truth about you?"

"Now listen!" protested Evans, who seemed to be shivering as much with fear as with the cold, "you guys talk like you expected me to pull a fast one. Hell, it's complicated enough if we all tell the truth—don't worry about me!"

"I was using you for an example," Archer told him. "The same thing applies to each of us, and we should all be able to see that honesty is the only workable policy. There's one more little matter to be decided: the order in which we report. I think it would be fair to reverse the order of exposure, which would probably make it the order of observation. I was exposed last, so I'll report first, then Evans, then Stokely.

"Now I'd suggest we take our positions, so we can kill these lights and let our eyes get used to the dark. There's only six to eight minutes to go."

Archer turned and started off, half expecting some last-minute objection from Stokely. But the latter merely waited to assure himself by means of his flashlight that Archer and Evans were halfway to their appointed places, then started making his way toward his own.

THE SPOT to which Archer had assigned himself turned out to be a jumble of loose rocks, complete with small and unpleasant denizens. He frowned. The footing would be very bad for dodging bullets, should matters turn out unsatisfactory to Stokely.

As the latter reached his position, about 75 feet away, Archer called out:

"Let's all face the ship, and don't anybody move after the lights are out, or you'll lose your orientation. Don't even shift your feet! Four to six minutes to go—but it could be sooner! I'm stripping down now."

He switched off his flashlight, and after a moment, Stokely and Evans did likewise. The night closed in disconcertingly, the utter dark wiping out all visual cues and rendering one's very balance momentarily precarious.

Archer removed the watch from his wrist and placed it in his pocket. Its face was luminous, and he was uncertain of its possible competition. He doffed his jacket and tied it about his hips, then unzipped his shirt to the waist and slipped it from his shoulders, tucking the sleeves into his belt.

The air was too dry for a sudden shock of cold, but within seconds his outer flesh began to ache dully, and there was difficulty in expanding his chest sufficiently to breathe. He wondered how much of it a healthy man could stand before pneumonia became certain.

Stokely was apparently trying to warm things up in his vicinity with a muttered string of vehement oaths, and Archer thought he heard a low groan from the direction of Evans.

The black border of the horizon was becoming visible now against the lesser darkness of the sky. Directly before him was the outline of the ship, the control-room ports showing dim and ghostly above with the light seeping up from the waist compartment.

Archer began turning his head back and forth at about ten-second intervals, staring into the blackness approximately 60 degrees each side of center, swinging his arms and flexing the muscles of his torso in a losing battle against the advancing numbness.

He started suddenly at a slight sound of movement in the rocks not two yards away in the direction of Evans. But it was far too faint for human feet on that treacherous ground. More probably it was

some small monster—quite possibly attracted by the dubious warmth of Archer's body, which was certainly radiating for all it was worth.

Wryly, he thought of one of the more abhorrent of the local fauna, a lizzard-like creature which attacked any animal which had the single qualification of being within a considerable jumping range. The beastie combined the least intelligence with the most virulent poison in several star-systems. With barbed feet and tail, it clung to its victim through the death throes—which usually began immediately—and unless torn apart or crushed in the process, it fed. Fortunately, the species was one of hundreds equally numerous and generally less deadly.

AT LEAST five minutes had passed, by the most meticulous of e s t i m a t e s, when Archer saw the glow. He had been looking at it for several seconds, in the direction of Stokely, before he realized what it was.

He had expected a modification of the greenish luminescence of the jade itself. But this was a mere patch of gray in the blackness, to begin with. It whitened, gradually revealing the blurred silhouette of the man within it. At that level it remained, and his outline grew no sharper. By blinking several times, Archer was able to distinguish the arms from the rest of him, and assumed from their respective positions that Stokely was holding his gun in his left hand, the syringe in his right.

It seemed twice as long—by which Archer judged it was about half—before a similar dusky patch became visible in the direction of Evans. He showed up very soon thereafter, because unlike Stokely, he was churning his arms as if in direct combat with the cold.

Archer began to count slowly to himself, swinging his arms in a period of about a second. He had not done so before, because it would have served no particular purpose, and would have made the time seem even longer. Now it was important not to allow too long an interval following the s e c o n d revelation of the deadly symptom. There must not be too much time for the others to think about the situation.

Yet there must be enough to insure his showing the symptom himself, if he were going to. He estimated that Evans' period of "incubation"

had varied from Stokely's by about a minute, allowing for the difference in the time of exposure. If Archer's varied from Evans' by as much as two minutes, there could still be three minutes or more to go. Of course, it was possible that he already showed it—or even that he had been the first. Five minutes should allow a safe margin, he decided.

Two minutes of it were now gone. Archer's arms felt like lead-weighted pendulums, yet he restrained the tendency to urge them to more rapid motion. The count of 60 took a small eternity.

Three minutes. His arms were so numb it was occasionally difficult to tell for sure when they had reached the end of their swing. It would have been reassuring to be able to see them. He widened his eyes and blinked rapidly, trying to penetrate the dark, and momentarily he almost fancied he saw a dim haze about him. He thought of the dead man they had found in the pilot's seat. There were no limits to the fallacy of human vision, under emotional stress.

Four minutes. If the original 20-minute period happened to be over and the others were aware of it, they made no sign. That would not be strange. Having agreed that Archer would make the first report, they would hesitate to venture any comment, for fear of dropping some kind of hint.

Five minutes. Archer fumbled awkwardly for his watch. If all his estimates, pieced together, were correct, there should still be a minute to go.

He was amazed to find that there was not. By leaning over backward in his guesses, he had actually managed to be conservative. The time was up—in fact, it was almost 15 seconds past. It was time to get the formalities over with and end this desperate game.

"All right!" Archer said loudly, his voice cracking slightly. "It's time to report, and here's mine—" He paused briefly, then finished: "I see it."

IT WAS NOW up to the others either to lie or to admit they saw it. It didn't particularly matter which, but Archer rather expected the truth. Evans was next.

After a moment, the latter's voice came somewhat falteringly, but clearly enough: "I see it."

Surprisingly, Stokely did not keep them waiting. His report came immediately, in a hoarse monotone: "I see it."

Now. Archer's gaze swung back and forth between the two others during the space of a long breath. Their shadowy figures did not move, but stood irresolute.

Archer exhaled with vast relief. "Okay, you fellows," he announced, "we've all got it. Here goes my injection."

Watching Stokely carefully, he plucked the syringe from his belt with enormous caution, and forced his feeble right hand to drive the needle into his left forearm and press the plunger all the way. There was one slight advantage to the cold, after all—he hardly felt the perforation.

He dared not pull up his shirt as yet. It could very easily have the effect of making him fade partially from Stokely's view, and might provoke the big man into blazing away at him.

It was quite possible that Stokely would shoot anyhow, though under the circumstances his aim might not be at its best.

"You lie!" Stokely said suddenly, as between clenched teeth. "The only way you could know about yourself would be if I didn't have it. Then you'd know where Evans must have seen it."

"One minute ago," said Archer, "that would have been true. And if you had thought of it a minute ago, instead of just now, things might have been different. But putting yourself in my position with respect to Evans, or in his with respect to me, was too big a step for your egocentric mind. You haven't quite done it yet, or you would understand this:

"If you hadn't shown the aura, I would have known *instantly* that I did. Also, Evans would have known about himself, immediately. But we d i d n ' t know, immediately. None of us did. And there is only one way we could all see it and remain uncertain. That is for all of us to have it. I didn't know, you both didn't know—and therefore I knew. Can you follow that?"

After a pause, Archer went on: "Incidentally, I wouldn't let a dog die the way both of you are going to in the next few minutes unless you do something about it. That's why I've taken the trouble to explain it."

Evans suddenly cleared his throat, and his voice came plaintively: "Uh—are you sure I've got it, Mr. Archer?" The necessity of the conclusion was clearly beyond him.

"Quite sure," Archer returned, noting that Evans had sought the truth from him in-

stead of his own colleague in crime.

"That's good enough for me." Evans' motions showed dimly that he was making the injection.

But Archer spared him only a glance and turned back to watching Stokely. The latter had not yet moved.

"Okay, Stokely," said Archer, "I'll give you a better break than you'd give me—I'll prove it to you. You're facing me now. Raise either arm, and I'll tell you which one it is."

Stokely seemed to hesitate, then raised both arms to the horizontal.

"You're pretty sharp, at that," Archer told him, "when it comes to thinking from your own corner. You raised both of them."

Stokely's arms dropped, but not all the way. There was a motion as of applying the hypodermic.

Quickly, Archer drew the sleeves of his shirt over his arms. But he had counted too heavily on Stokely's preoccupation. The latter turned rigidly, as if continuing the injection, and fired.

Archer felt a shock which spun him half around, but could not tell just where he was hit, for the moment. He began to run awkwardly through the loose rocks toward the sanctuary of the pile of boulders, raising his jacket high to screen his head. In doing so, the location of his wound became evident with a jab of pain. His left arm was useless.

The next instant, the glaring beam of Stokely's flashlight picked him out, and the second bullet spanged against a boulder just as he ducked behind it, peppering his cheek with rock dust.

Stooping low, Archer moved around the pile, as the crunching sound of Stokely's rapid footsteps came closer. He cursed the luck that had enabled Stokely to cripple him. He felt his paralyzed arm gingerly—the bullet had struck just below the shoulder, and he guessed that the bone was broken, but the wound did not seem to be bleeding much.

There was no use making a break for the next heap of rocks over this treacherous ground, even if he knew precisely where it lay. He would simply have to play tag with Stokely until—

Suddenly, the footsteps slowed and seemed to stumble. There was a clattering among the rocks and the lancing beam of the flashlight cut off. Darkness and silence descended.

WILL ARCHER waited tensely. If all were well, Stokely should be out like the light he had been carrying. But Archer was in no hurry about using his own. It would make him altogether too vulnerable, in case this just might be a ruse.

Then from a little distance came the welcome beam of Evans' light. Archer peered out carefully and beheld the prone, unmoving figure of Stokely, his arms doubled under him as if to break his fall.

Unhurriedly, Archer turned on his own flashlight, walked around and set it between two rocks so that its beam made a path of light between himself and the ship. He rolled the big man over with a thrust of his foot, exposing the gun underneath. This, and one gun from the unconscious man's two holsters, Archer picked up and stuck in his belt. The remaining one—Archer's own —he pointed at Evans, who had stopped ten yards away.

The latter wore a puzzled expression — apparently at having found the wrong body.

"What did you do," he asked Archer, "hit him with a rock? Is he dead?"

"I wish I had," said Archer without humor, "and I wouldn't feel a bit bad if he were. In fact, I intend to see to it that he is lawfully executed. But in order to do that it will be necessary to get him back to the base. You're elected to drag him over to the hoist."

Archer stooped again, without taking his eyes off Evans, and laid his gun on the ground. He took the kit of jade from Stokely's belt and pocketed it, then picked up the gun again and stepped back a few paces.

"You can fasten his arms with his own belt," he told Evans, "and his legs with yours. He should sleep for hours, but there's no use taking chances."

Evans came forward meekly and bent over Stokely, then looked up, startled. "The hypodermics! You must have put something in ours that—"

"Not yours. Do you recall how willingly he took the one with the most in it? Well, he got no more antitoxin than you and I did. The rest was a quick-acting sedative that the doctor brought aboard in case we ran into a lunatic. I emptied most of it into the distilled water, but I left enough to do the trick. I trust you're buckling that belt good and tight."

Evans' blue lips twisted

Continued on page 119

THE FIRST

"Man will need signposts to guide the way to infinity." That's a quotation from— and a description of— this inspiring story

By EDWARD LUDWIG

THE CITY was enchanted. It was a colossal music box blaring forth a thousand chants of victory. It was a rainbow torn down from the sky and poured over the earth. It was a magic nursery through which eager-eyed children swarmed to behold a sparkling new toy.

Three spacemen, three conquerors-to-be, sat stiffly in the back seat of a blue-bannered convertible. The car moved snail-like toward the Capitol steps, escorted by a hundred bands, eight hundred flowered floats, and ten thousand marching men.

In its front seat, standing, waving to the crowd, was Captain George Everson. Everson —the legless man. Everson— the bronzed giant whose first rocketship had exploded at take-off, and yet who had lived to walk on artificial legs, to build a second rocket, and to infect all the world with his square-jawed determination.

It was barely eight o'clock on this April morning of the year 1982, yet the onslaught against the spacemen had begun. Confetti rained on them. Breeze-filled flags dazzled them. Band music deafened them. The flow of shouting spectators dizzied them. It was a day when holiday hats and mathematicians' formulae, roasted peanuts and ancient dreams were blended in a fury of joy.

The magic wand that had enchanted the city was Everson's *Lunar Lady*. And it *was* like a wand—1,000 tons of it, poised on the takeoff field on the outskirts of the city, its needle-point nose turned skyward and shining silver in the morning sunlight.

Tonight, at sunset, when the city was saturated with speeches and music and popcorn and prayer, the great rocket would rumble and belch flame and rise. Mankind would begin its first flight to the moon!

So it seemed that the people of all the earth were basking in joy and hope, every man, woman and child—with one exception . . .

JEFFREY SIMON rose from his bed, awakened by the rhythm of march music outside his small apartment. He shuffled sleepily to a window. He blinked at the array of flags and bunting that lined the street.

The music became louder.

He ran a shaky, withered hand over his wizened face, brushed stringy white hair back from his forehead. His lips curved in a grim half-smile.

"It's starting," he murmured, "—the day that should have been yours."

He realized that he was talking to himself again. But although he was only fifty-six, talking aloud seemed natural to him. It not only eased his loneliness; it also helped him to clarify his muddled thoughts.

"Today is your last chance. Not tomorrow or the next day. It *has* to be today."

The thump-thump of a base drum was like a gigantic heart-beat shaking all the land. The blare of trumpets was a victory song, strong enough to live in the mind of a man forever, strong enough to silence forever the voices of fear and loneliness that might haunt a spaceman.

"That's the music," Jeffrey Simon muttered, "that should have been yours."

A crimson-lettered banner said: EVERSON — THE FIRST.

What a mockery those words were! It was like worshiping an evil, false-faced goddess. The illusion should and must be destroyed.

He jerked erect. He must move quickly. He must put an end to this cosmic lie.

He dressed in a freshly-cleaned, single-breasted tweed suit. His tie was hastily knotted. There was no time for breakfast.

He strode to a drawer of his bureau, yanked it open, dug away a layer of underclothing. He smiled as he beheld two objects.

His hands moved gently. His hands were like those of a florist arranging a garland of delicate blossoms. They were like the hands of a surgeon fearful of a fatal error. They were like the hands of a father upon his first-born.

He picked up the stone.

It was a bright, phosphorescent green, mottled with flecks of gold and no larger than an apple. Its glow seemed to fill all the room. Jeffrey remembered the cave at the base of Luna's Mount Pico from where he'd chipped it. The cave's eerie glow had almost seemed alive, quivering and pulsing with alien energy. Jeffrey, in his space-suit and half blinded, had staggered when he left with his specimen.

Next, he touched the photograph.

It was a moment of eternity captured long ago and still imprisoned in a wrinkled, yellowed paper. On it was the rocket, the *Marilyn*, which had been his home for fifteen years. Behind it, on a rise in the pock-marked Lunar ter-

rain, was one of the launching stations which had never been used. In the background loomed the nightmarish Tenerife Mountains. And hovering above all in a sky of black velvet was a shining, blue-green ball—the earth.

Carefully, Jeffrey placed the photograph in a large envelope and slid it, with the stone, into his coat's inner pocket.

"They'll believe now," he murmured. "They ignored the letters, the telegrams. Now, with proof, they'll believe. They'll learn what is a lie and what is the truth. They'll learn who was *really* first."

A moment later he was on the street, struggling to filter through the crowd. For a few seconds he knew terror, because those in the crowd had surrendered all individuality. They had become a single, automatic entity, hypnotized by the tapestry of color and sound and responding to it alone. The crowd closed in upon him like the tentacles of an octopus, imprisoning him and thrusting him forward and back.

At last, panting, he broke free. He found a side street—one that would not be invaded by the parade. He walked swiftly. Then, although breath came hard, he ran.

CARVED ABOVE the entrance of the huge stone building were the words:

UNITED STATES BUREAU OF INTERPLANETARY RESEARCH

Jeffrey stopped to catch his breath. How many of his letters had passed over that mountainous series of steps? How many, like those to Congress, to the Pentagon and to the President, had been crumpled, torn, tossed into waste baskets?

It didn't matter. He was doing now what he should have done a month ago—appearing in person with his proof.

He lumbered up the stone steps. His watery eyes widened at the bright murals in the vast foyer—murals of stars and planets, of rockets and spacemen, all centered about a gigantic and symbolic pair of human hands reaching upward.

Jeffrey squinted down the white, clean, cool halls.

So this was where spacemen of today lived, studied, worked, experimented. How different from that battered quonset hut in the hot, wind-burnt New Mexican desert.

"May I help you, sir?"

The voice snapped him back to reality.

He turned and saw a young man seated at a desk a short distance away. The man was sleepy-eyed, with black, close-cropped hair and ears that were too big. On the desk was a placard that said: *Officer of The Day: Lieutenant Andrews.*

The lieutenant drummed his fingers on the desk. "Speak up, old timer. What is it? If you want information on today's flight, just help yourself to these folders."

"No, no." Jeffrey walked up to the desk, brushed away the folders. "I—I want to see someone in authority. There's something I have to tell them."

"I'm in charge. Go ahead and tell it to me."

Jeffrey trembled. "It's going to sound crazy. You might not believe—"

"Go ahead and tell it. Then I'll decide whether to believe."

Confidence came to Jeffrey. He touched the reassuring bulge of the stone and the photograph in his pocket. Then he began to speak.

"Well, you've read how things were back in 1957. The world cut in half. Communism on one side, Democracy on the other. Both sides threatening the other. Both building faster and faster jets and bigger and bigger H-bombs. People felt like they were walking on tight-ropes.

"In August of '57 the Russians announced that they had the biggest H-bomb ever made. The President and his cabinet and the top brass met. The Army Chief of Staff was already on record in saying there was no perfect defense against an H-bomb attack. Radar nets, anti-aircraft and fighter planes would take care of a lot of attacking bombers or missiles, but some would probably get through. There had to be something else—something as daring as the first A-bomb project back in World War II.

"The answer was obvious: a *manned* artificial satellite."

The lieutenant stiffened. He made a sucking noise with his lips.

"Yep," Jeffrey continued, a manned satellite. Our scientists had developed the tiny, unmanned 'mouse.' A full-scale version was tougher—but possible.

"And a nation in control of such a satellite would watch over all the world. From its near-zero gravity it could launch guided atomic missiles to any point on the earth."

Jeffrey cleared his throat. His listener was still attentive.

"So Project Pandora began.

Like the Manhattan Project, it was top secret, because we didn't want the Russians to start like crazy on their own Project. I never learned how many men were involved—probably about 100,000. But all except maybe a hundred or so thought they were working on new types of jets or fuels.

"A new town — Pandora City—sprang up in New Mexico for general research. Really top secret stuff, like the construction of our rockets, was handled in Hell Canyon, which probably still isn't on your maps. You couldn't get there except by cargo-carrying helicopter.

"I was a guided missile man transferred from Point Mugu to the Canyon. Entering that hell-hole was like being sentenced for life. We had our movies and beer, but the sun and mountains were still there. I used to look at those mountains and wonder if I dared try to escape. Then I thought of the desert on the other side. There *was* no escape—except through death or by finishing the damn project.

"By the fall of '58 we had our fuel. Dilute monatomic hydrogen—powerful as the guts of an H-bomb, but controllable, suitable for atomic engines. Powered with that fuel, a rocket could rip through the old seven-mile-a-second barrier like a knife cutting through tissue paper.

"Then a new question came up. Was the artificial satellite the ideal solution to our problem? Even at a height of a thousand miles, it could be visible to Russian astronomers. Russian knowledge of our secret could start off a Third World War. And, if the Russians developed their own guided missile program, the satellite might be vulnerable.

"We'd developed an alloy of rare earths for our jet tubes, so there was no reason why we couldn't hit the moon direct. A Lunar station could be camouflaged, and launching platforms for missiles could be scattered. Most important, the moon would give us utter secrecy."

Jeffrey's voice trailed. A cloud of memory seemed to drift before his vision. "And —and I guess there was something else, too. We didn't want to stop with just a satellite. We had the power to take space by the nose and pull it around like a whipped dog. The first men to leave our planet—think of those words. The first, the very first. The thought makes you a little drunk."

He smiled. "The President, his cabinet, the top brass okayed our ideas. So the moon it was!"

LIEUTENANT ANDREWS rose, his mouth a tight, white line.

"Afraid we'll have to call it a day," he muttered. "It's time for me to go off duty. Sorry."

"But—but your relief isn't here. You can't—"

"Sorry." The man's gaze avoided Jeffrey's face.

He moved swiftly, his tall body easing around the desk, then striding down the hall.

Jeffrey was like a statue, an absurd, bulging-eyed statue with right hand still raised in a climactic, melodramatic gesture.

"But I haven't finished!" he cried. "You haven't heard—"

The lieutenant m a r c h e d away, oblivious to Jeffrey's pleading voice. Abruptly, his bright uniform disappeared into one of the labyrinth's many rooms.

Jeffrey was a fragile leaf mauled by winds of desperation. He dug furiously into his coat's inner pocket.

"You haven't s e e n my proof!" he screamed.

There was no reply save the cold, hollow, hundred-tongued echo of his own words.

Jeffrey looked down at his outstretched h a n d s. They were holding the faded photograph and the shining stone, offering them to the silence.

OUTSIDE, the city was like a merry-go-round whirling faster and faster. Music had swelled to a dizzying crescendo. Colors were brighter in the n o o n s u n l i g h t. Voices were louder, prayers stronger . . .

"Ten to one they don't make it," said a rat-faced man. "I'll take *all* bets . . ."

"They will not be alone," the solemn man in the black robe intoned to his congregation. "For yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ."

"Why must Daddy go up into the sky, Mama? Why?" asked the child.

"He's going to be a pioneer, dear. He's going to be one of the first to go to the moon."

"But why, Mama? Why?

The bearded man shouted, "The wrath of God will fall upon us and upon our children and our children's children. Man was not meant—"

"We have our Marco Polo, our Columbus, our Wright Brothers and our Lindbergh. Now, by the grace of God, we have our George Everson!"

"Step right up, folks! Get

your souvenir programs here! And don't forget your dark glasses for the takeoff. Special today—only one dollar!"

A CLOCK struck one.

"No," said the stiffly polite girl, "the city editor isn't in. No, our reporters are covering the flight. Sorry."

A clock struck two.

"Sorry."

Jeffrey sighed. What else was there? The Research Bureau. The Department of Defense, the Pentagon. *The Times, The Herald, The Post.* He hadn't wanted to take his story to the newspapers, but they had given him a last, futile hope. Now, even they had refused to listen.

There was still *The Mirror.* The twilight news. The love nests, the exposés, the screaming headlines that most papers were saving for the second coming of Christ.

Jeffrey found himself walking up dark, thinly carpeted stairs, pushing a faded swinging door. Then someone was leading him forward. Sounds of clacking typewriters and rustling papers filled the air.

The photograph and the moon stone were in his hands. He was thrusting them forward.

"This is my p r o o f," he mumbled automatically.

For a long time his surroundings were like the terrain in a dimly remembered dream. Then hands helped him into a chair.

A deep voice grunted at him. "Okay, proof of what?"

Jeffrey blinked. His brain fought to break through the wall of weariness that enclosed it. He saw that the man before him was middle-aged, balding, small-eyed. His trace of a smile was not unpleasant.

"What's it all about, fellow?" the man asked, leaning back in his chair.

Thank you, God, thought Jeffrey, *that I have another chance.*

He began again. 1957, the H-bomb, Project Pandora. Lord, if he could only show this man the images that still hung in his memory!

But how could you capture the dizzying blackness of space, the hypnotic silver of stars, and recreate their magic in mere words? How feeble were words. They were like broken fingers trying to carry sand.

Nevertheless, the man listened. Jeffrey came to the words, "So the moon it was!" And even then the man said nothing. Jeffrey went on:

"Our first rocket was ready by the summer of '59. We named it the *Marilyn*—after

Marilyn Monroe, the top glamour gal of those days. And I was in the ship's first crew.

"Our take off wasn't like this circus today. No music, no speeches, no parades. We had a shot of brandy in the morning. We shook hands with our friends and puffed on cigarettes and the C. O. said a prayer. Then we took off."

Jeffrey weighed words and memories in his mind. "It'd take me a year to tell about how space looks and how the moon is; and how you feel when all the things you love are in a cloud-wrapped ball 240,000 miles away. Or how it feels to see your buddies slip through the paper-thin crust that covers parts of the moon and go down into nothingness, just as if the hand of God wiped them out of the universe.

"Anyway, we hit the moon. The ship stayed long enough for us to build a dome. Then we split the crew in half. Five stayed, the rest shuttled back to Earth for more supplies. Three months later the second rocket, the *June Randy*, was ready, and life got a little easier. We began to get an occasional case of beer and mail from home. Our families thought they were writing to Pandora City. To think that those little three-cent letters would go all the way to Luna would have seemed a lunatic's dream to them.

"By the summer of '61 Project Pandora was completed. We had two domes and four launching stations, each a hundred miles apart. The missiles on the launching platforms were like those beds of nails the yogis are supposed to lie on—only a hundred times bigger. And each nail was a uranium-lithium-tritium-headed rocket.

"1961 slipped by, and '62 and '63. There were a few aborted revolutions on Earth, a few moments of tension, but no war."

A veil of loneliness seemed to fall over his vision, separating him from his listener.

"Go ahead," the man prompted him.

"Well, new faces appeared in our crews. The older fellows were given memory-washes so they wouldn't start blabbing when they returned to Earth. Psychiatry was pretty primitive in those days. The treatment wasn't much more than hypnosis, creating an artificial psychic block in their minds. After a while, it seemed like men were coming and going like figures on a treadmill—but, me, I stayed on."

"You stayed on? Why?"

Jeffrey thought for an instant. "Because there were two kinds of loneliness for us. One was being on the moon, in silence and emptiness. The other was being on Earth, in the midst of life and knowing the biggest secret in the world and not being able to talk about it. And of the two kinds of loneliness, to me, the last was the worst. So I stayed on the *Marilyn*."

JEFFREY TRIED to keep his voice calm, his manner confident.

"Then came the Russian Revolution of '74, the rise of democracy behind the crumbling Iron Curtain. The rest of the world watched and waited. We kept those launching platforms ready—just in case. But by '76, there was no doubt about it. Communism was over and done. The world was at peace.

"And with the arrival of peace, man's energies had to be directed into new channels. Till now, the government had quietly discouraged any talk about space flight. But now man craved adventure. Newspapers and public opinion began to beat the drum for that first flight to the moon."

He chuckled softly. "The President must have been tearing his hair out. What the hell was he going to do with Project Pandora? The Russians mustn't know that for fifteen years our missiles had been ready to blast them to eternity. The old hates had been buried. They couldn't be allowed to rise again."

"So Project Pandora became Project Garbage. The domes and platforms were dismantled and carried back to Pandora City. The moon was the biggest garbage dump in the Solar System, but it had to be cleaned up to the last beer can and cigarette butt. It had to become virgin again, ready to receive what Earth would later call the first pioneers of space. And it was then, when discipline was low, that I smuggled out the moonstone and the photo.

"Everybody got the memory-wash—from the President on down. I was a civilian again with a nice pension. For the first couple of years I couldn't remember a thing. I only knew I'd done secret work for the government. I'd look at my photo and stone and wonder where I got them.

"But gradually my memory came back. Maybe it was because of the photo, or maybe because I'd been on Luna and the *Marilyn* so much longer than the others.

"Last year I got mad when

Everson announced plans to hit the moon. His name was in headlines every day. He was becoming a hero without even leaving the ground. And there were a hundred men whose bodies were already lost on Luna. They were the real heroes, the real pioneers. This celebration today—it's a mockery. I want the world to know the truth."

FOR THE SPACE of a minute the small-eyed man was silent. His fingers toyed with the stone and the photograph.

Finally he murmured, "Suppose I publish your story. How much do you want for it?"

To Jeffrey, the words were like April sunshine streaking into a cobwebbed winter attic.

"You—you want to use the story? You believe me?"

"I didn't say I believe it. I don't give a damn whether it's true or not. My job is to sell newspapers. I asked how much you want for it."

"Nothing," Jeffrey said softly.

The small-eyed man grunted. "We could flood the city with the afternoon edition. People are buying anything with a moon angle. The Russians wouldn't shout for joy, but there shouldn't be any harm done at this late date."

His eyes brightened. "We might get away with it. We've got your stone. We could demand that Everson locate the place where you got it and either prove or disprove your story. Why, that'd be good for months!"

He laughed. "What a damper we'll put on *this* celebration! We'll make the city seem like a morgue. It's a dirty, lousy trick, but by God it'll sell papers!"

Jeffrey leaned forward, squinting. "A dirty, lousy trick? What do you mean?"

"Skip it." The man's enthusiasm was rising. He was like fizzing soda in a thumb-stoppered, shaken bottle. "We got to get this story in print. Hey, Marty! Get the dicto-typer over here! I've been waiting all my life to yell stop those presses. Marty! *Stop those goddamn presses*!"

"What did you mean?" Jeffrey insisted. "How can telling people the truth be a dirty, lousy trick?"

The small-eyed man laughed again. "You don't think folks'll *like* this story, do you? You don't think they'll feel like celebrating when they read this, do you? It's a cinch they won't start cheering *you* for what you did almost twenty years ago! Say, wait'll Everson sees that moon pic plastered on my front page.

There's an angle! A pic of Everson's expression! Hey, Marty! Get me—"

RESTLESSLY, Jeffrey rose and shuffled to a window. One of the city's myriad parades, like a battalion of colored ants, was s t r e a m i n g down the street.

The small-eyed man yelled, "Come on, let's have that story again! This time it's for publication."

Jeffrey didn't answer. Odd thoughts were stirring in deep recesses of his mind.

"Come on! Let's have that story!"

Jeffrey stared out the window, a far-away gaze in his eyes. "Do—do you suppose I was the only one who remembered? There must be others. I couldn't be the only one."

"Sure, there could be others —if your yarn is true. Maybe they've tried to tell and nobody believed 'em. Or maybe they're keeping quiet. Maybe they don't want to make dopes out of Everson and his men. Maybe they want to keep 'em h e r o e s. Now, gimme that story!" He flicked a switch on the dicto-typer.

Words echoed in Jeffrey's brain. *Maybe they don't want to make dopes out of Everson and his men. Maybe they want to keep 'em heroes. . . . It's a cinch they won't start cheering you for what you did almost twenty years ago.*

The world has need of heroes, he thought. There's Luna, and then there are Venus and Mars and Jupiter and all the others; and, always, there are the stars. And, between, there are miles and years of darkness and loneliness, and courage is a candle flame too easily extinguished. Mankind will need songs of daring and tales of heroes and signposts to guide the way to i n f i n i t y. You can't make heroes out of men whose very names are forgotten. You can't make heroes out of tired old bones.

Jeffrey frowned as the hum of presses echoed in his ears.

The great headlines would descend upon the enchanted city like a black tidal wave. They would swirl through the streets, d e v o u r the bright color, absorb the gay sound, suck the joy into dark waters of doubt and suspicion.

The small-eyed man was shouting at him. He did not hear.

After all, Jeffrey told himself, *this is for you. It's not for Everson and his men, really. It's for the pioneers, for those who dare to be first. The eyes are not on you, and the voices do not speak to you.*

Yet all this, really, is for you—for you were the first. Would you destroy this day that is yours?

A voice was swearing at him.

What a day it was! Why, it must be the greatest in the history of Earth. It was a day for all history books everywhere, always. It was a shame that the minutes were piling one upon the other so rapidly. How wonderful if they could be bottled and sealed like sweet perfume, to be dispensed slowly, a scent a month, a drop a year.

Hands were tugging at his arm. He shook himself free. He turned back to the desk, seized the moon-stone and the photograph, replaced them in his pocket.

Silently, head high, he strode past the naked, astonished faces . . .

DUSK. A silence blanketed the take-off field. The seconds hung in the air like bits of fire and ice.

Captain George Everson, the man with no legs, waved to the multitude as he entered his silver rocket.

Presently there was a sound of thunder, and the land trembled. Flame belched from the stern of the *Lunar Lady*. Slowly, the rocket began to rise. The multitude drew back, like frightened red ghosts in the fiery glare from the grumbling jets.

A greater avalanche of flame spewed from the rocket. A furnace-hot wind shrilled over the field, lashing at hair and clothing, at banner and flag.

And suddenly the *Lunar Lady* was gone. It was a needle of fire high in the twilight sky, a vanishing target for a million narrowed eyes.

A hushed, reverent murmur rose from the field.

A small girl in a pink party dress tugged at her mother's skirt.

"Look, Mommy," she whispered. "Look at that funny old man. He keeps saying, 'This is for you,' and he's crying and laughing at the same time!"

∞ ∞ ∞

WHO IS HOMER? What is it about ordinary gasoline that sends shivers of delight up and down his—er—spine? How do Galahad and Confucius manage to get him in such a terrible predicament? And what's wrong with his poetry, anyway? Read the hilarious but poignant answers in "Homer" by L. Sprague de Camp—in the January INFINITY.

Fanfare

Whenever something of outstanding quality can be found, Infinity *will reprint an item from a "fanzine"—one of the amateur journals published as a hobby by the more enthusiastic devotees of science fiction. The following story, "The Siren of Space" by Dave Jenrette, originally appeared in* Merlin, *a mimeographed magazine published by Lee Anne Tremper,* 1022 *N. Tuxedo St., Indianapolis* 1, *Ind., at* 5¢ *per copy.*

MY NAME is Guy Mordan. I'm in the Interplanetary Patrol. My job: keep alert for hazards to astronavigation, space ships in distress, and all illegal activities.

It was the last category that gave me the most trouble. For the last thirteen days a space ship had left the dark side of Mercury, from the restricted zone where experiments in interstellar travel are being conducted.

Each time the ship was challenged by the Patrol and each time a proper pass and clearance was produced. The pilot always turned out to be Miss Bella Donna, a Saturnalian. Miss Donna was said to be an interplanetary spy, smuggler, and thief, but no one had ever pinned her down. With such a space pilot I became very suspicious. Who wouldn't?

Previously, only a perfunctory inspection had been made, but I had now resolved to comb that ship from bow to stern plates to discover exactly what the notorious Siren of Saturn was smuggling.

It was exactly 2315 SST (Solar Standard Time) when I boarded the girl's ship with two of my men.

Bella was picturesquely sprawled on the acceleration chair and wearing very little except a smile. Without a very liberal interpretation of the clothing regulations she was, for all practical purposes, nude.

"Good evening, Ma'm," I said, cordially. "I'd like to check your clearance and pass forms."

"Of course," she said, flickering her eye lashes rapidly.

I studied them very carefully, hoping for one tiny little mistake, a strikeover, a dirt smudge.

"All right," I said grudgingly, "your form seems properly filled out."

"I'll say!" said one of my men.

I gave the man a properly withering glance and made a mental note of his unusual behavior. I continued in my interrogation of Miss Donna.

"You don't fool me one bit," I said coolly. "You're up to some mischief. You're hiding something!"

She pouted. "Do I look like the kind of girl who would hide anything?" she asked and shrugged her—uh—shoulders.

I reddened slightly and told her that remained to be seen.

"I intend to search every inch of your space ship for contraband matter," I announced.

She leaned back into the acceleration chair and took an unusually deep breath.

"Suit yourself," she said.

So began the search of the space ship. My men got into space suits and laboriously began covering the outer skin with geiger counters and divining rods. Inside we checked with X-rays, geigers, litmus paper, and flashlights. We tapped and rapped; checked, rechecked; analyzed and ionized. We checked racks, closets, and upholstery (we found 35c in a seat cushion and Bella said we could keep it). Every possible place where any article could be hidden—we checked.

At last we gave up and I sent my men back to the space ship.

I sat down and thought, but there couldn't be any other hiding place on board that ship. Then an idea came to mind. Ah, I thought, the obvious solution! I tried the final idea (fortunately the men were aboard my ship and wouldn't be embarrassed), but there was nothing on Bella Donna either, though I made a very thorough search.

There was only one thing to do. In the Patrol no one failed. I had failed. Hence, I was no longer in the Patrol. Accordingly, I wrote out a brief resignation. I signed it and Miss Donna witnessed it.

"Now that I have failed so miserably," I said (tears were running down my cheeks), "I have one favor to ask of you. On my honor as an ex-captain to keep your secret I ask you: what have you been stealing?"

Bella was crying, too, and kissed me gently on the forehead before she could control herself enough to speak.

"Space ships," she said.

We kissed each other passionately. ∞

Each 1955 was worse than the last!

PLACEBO

By DAVID MASON

THE OBJECT appeared in the middle of Main Way, about fifty feet from the statue of Vachel Lindsay, and at least a hundred from anything else. It was much too big and complicated to have been hidden anywhere, and it hadn't any wheels, tracks, wings, or other visible means of movement.

Corrigan, looking the object over, decided that it could not have come from any logical place in the world. Not being prejudiced, he then thought a little about the illogical places, and the places that weren't in the world. Corrigan decided that it must be another attempt at time travel, and he clucked his tongue sympathetically.

Well, someone had to break the news. Corrigan arose from the grass and walked toward the object.

There was a young man sitting in the object, on a sort of high saddle. He looked a little wild-eyed, and he seemed to be talking to himself, as he pulled and twisted at the rows of controls in front of him. Corrigan, looking up at him, decided that he couldn't be very healthy, and that the stiff gray garments he wore must be extremely uncomfortable.

"Greetings, traveler," Corrigan called.

"You're speaking Anglish!" the young man exclaimed. "Good! Maybe I can get some help here. . . . What year is this?"

"1955, by most systems."

The young man turned a little paler.

"I've just left 1955," he said unhappily. "Four times, in fact. Four different 1955's. And each one's a bit worse.

Now the machine won't work."

"Your theory's wrong," Corrigan said calmly. "Hasn't it occurred to you yet that time travel might be impossible?"

The young man made a choked sound. He began to climb down from his perch, keeping his eyes fixed suspiciously on Corrigan as he did so. He saw Corrigan as a small brown man, dressed in loose blue trousers, barefooted, and with a puff of white hair that seemed never to have been properly cut. The lawns and grassy roads, the bright and impermanent-looking buildings, and Corrigan himself, all added up to one thing in the young man's mind.

"You're wrong," Corrigan said. "I'm not a lunatic, and this isn't an asylum. We don't have them."

The young man, on the ground now, stared at Corrigan in evident horror.

"Mind reading?"

"More or less," Corrigan said. "It saves time. For instance, you're Darwin Lenner, and you'd like very much to get back to wherever you started from. In fact, you have to, or something unpleasant might happen to you, by your standards."

"I'd be absent without permission," Lenner admitted. "I . . . I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Only when absolutely necessary," Corrigan smiled. "I'm a philosopher by trade, myself, not a mind reader. My name's Philip Corrigan, and I'd be very glad to help you on your way . . . but I think it might be a little difficult. We aren't really a very mechanically-minded people here."

Lenner ran his hands through his hair. "I've *got* to get back. Isn't there anybody who knows something about time machines?"

Corrigan had been thinking swiftly. He had also been carrying on a conversation which Lenner could not possibly hear, with a man who was several miles away.

"Burwell, he wants to go home."

"Fine. He ought to. Why doesn't he?"

"He lost his confidence. He thinks his machine's broken down."

"That kind, eh? I suppose the thing never really did work very well."

"Most of them don't. They go traveling around hit-or-miss through probability under the operator's own mental steam—but this fellow prob-

ably comes from a world where an idea like that's illegal."

"Sounds like it. Corrigan, take him on a guided tour or something, and keep him busy. I'll be over as soon as I can. I'm going to do something for his self-confidence. Here's the story to give him . . ."

CORRIGAN HAD always enjoyed conducting guided tours, and he was enjoying this one especially well. He had a slightly wicked taste for complicated teasing, and Lenner was a perfect object. He had evidently come from one of the more unpleasant probabilities, a world full of complex rules and harshly restrictive; everything that he saw bothered him. The handsome girls, wearing unstrategically placed flowers and very little else; the flocks of children, as plentiful as pigeons and apparently as free of supervision; the almost total absence of anybody actually performing useful work . . . all of it contributed to Lenner's increasing nervousness.

The guided tour went in a wide circle, and Lenner and Corrigan wound up sitting in a tavern facing on Main Way. Lenner ignored the green drink before him and peered unhappily out the big window toward his machine.

"Where *is* that friend of yours?" he asked, for the fifth time.

"He'll be here," Corrigan assured him. "Why hurry? Don't you like it here?"

Lenner's mouth hardened. He looked around him, and shook his head.

"No." He spoke almost apologetically. "I'm sorry . . . well, look, old fellow, no hard feelings, I hope. But this world of yours . . . primitive. Degenerate, I'd say."

"Primitive?"

"No laws—not even morals! Those girls . . . and of course, you don't have any civilized advantages. Not even ground transportation. That man you spoke of has to *walk* here. And that's something else I don't understand. You say he's another time traveler . . ."

"Probability traveler, actually," Corrigan corrected.

"All right, probability. Why does he stay here? Why would a really intelligent man give up civilization?"

"Well, you know how it is. He's gone native, you might say. Life among the lotos eaters, and all that. Might happen to anybody, even yourself."

Lenner shuddered.

"It's all right, though." Corrigan continued. "He'll be here any minute, and I'm sure he'll be able to help. Knows all there is to know about these machines. In fact, here he comes now."

Burwell entered, and Corrigan could hardly suppress a small chuckle. Burwell had picked up Lenner's ideas about what a man of intelligence and authority ought to look like, and had gone to some trouble to look the part. He was wearing a uniform of some sort, spectacles, and an expression of extreme wisdom.

"I'm sure I can repair what's wrong," Burwell told Lenner. "Let's go and look at your machine."

Arriving, Burwell climbed over the mechanism with an air of bored ability, occasionally thumping at something, adjusting something else, or hitting a part with a tool until it rang. He muttered to himself as he worked, allowing the sound of his musings to drift in Lenner's direction.

"Umm . . . badly twisted impeller . . . the varish is more or less waffled . . . let's see if . . . ah, there we are."

He climbed down and solemnly shook hands with Lenner.

"Fine machine you've got there, my boy. It'll take you back to your own place quite easily now. There wasn't a thing wrong except the drift crotch. However, I wouldn't use it again, if I were you. There's no real control on these things. A man could end up anywhere. And of course, you'd never find your way back here, without control."

"Well, thanks. . . ," Lenner said doubtfully. He glanced around. "It's a shame there's no way we could regularly communicate between our worlds. There's a lot we could do for this one."

"I'm sure of that," Burwell said, hastily looking away. "But it isn't worth the danger and difficulty of reaching us. For myself, it doesn't matter any more." He assumed a nobly tragic expression. "But you are young; you've got your life ahead of you; your State and your society need you. I'm glad to help you on your way."

Lenner mounted the machine, and Burwell beamed a thought at Corrigan.

"I've convinced him that the thing works, and that it would not be easy to come back. Actually, that machine of his is a real work of art. It doesn't do a damn thing. This boy comes from a place where they have to have a mechanical crutch for everything. His

gadgets are pink pill stuff . . . something to convince him he can do things he could do anyway. All we have to do now is give him a small mental shove to help him along, and he'll be home in no time. All right, now—SHOVE!"

Corrigan and Burwell shoved. Lenner and his machine faded and were gone, leaving only a flattened place on the grass.

"Brrr," Burwell said. "Am I glad that worked! If he'd stayed another week or so we would have had our first lunatic of the century."

"Or worse," Corrigan said, stirring the grass with his toes. "Did you get what he was thinking about when he talked about his world and ours getting into touch, and civilizing us?"

"I got it, all right." Burwell said. "The fellow's mind was a swamp. A real primitive. And just like any other primitive, all he needed was a placebo from a witch doctor. Me, in my savage regalia. Just let me get this thing with the glass in it off my nose, and these button things opened up a bit, and we can get on with that chess game. I hope the next traveler picks somewhere else to land, though—I've never felt so silly in my life!"

∞ ∞ ∞

Phantom Duel

Continued from page 99

glumly as he pulled off his own belt and applied it to Stokely's ankles. Suddenly, he smiled.

"Say! What makes you think they'll believe your story about what happened? It's your word against ours. Suppose we tell 'em that—"

"You're daydreaming," Archer broke in. "You'll be a lot better off to resign yourself to spending five or ten years in a penal colony—probably on some planet worse than this one.

"In the first place, you could never pass the lie-detector test, although Stokely might. In the second place, it isn't just my word against yours—our psychometric ratings will be weighed, too, and I'll let you guess whose will be found wanting. And finally, what kind of criminal will murder for profit, then change his mind and toss the loot on the manager's desk, of his own free will?

"Which is just what I intend to do. But there'll be one string attached. A sizable hunk of this stuff, together with a shiny new mallet, goes to Dr. Grimwood's pals." ∞

JOHN GIUNTA 55

A magnificent race had died in that nova. The enigma was: why?

the star

by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

Illustrated by GIUNTA

IT IS THREE THOUSAND light-years to the Vatican. Once I believed that space could have no power over Faith. Just as I believed that the heavens declared the glory of God's handiwork. Now I have seen that handiwork, and my faith is sorely troubled.

ARTHUR C. CLARKE, it has often been pointed out, possess the best attributes of poet and scientist. To these, INFINITY adds a third dimension, for Clarke is also a profound philosopher. This story is proof—a rare example of sympathetic insight mingled with the best science-fiction traditions. It may shock or disturb you, but it will not leave you unmoved. One thing, however, is certain: it could have been written by no one else.

I stare at the crucifix that hangs on the cabin wall above the Mark VI computer, and for the first time in my life I wonder if it is no more than an empty symbol.

I have told no one yet, but the truth cannot be concealed. The data are there for anyone to read, recorded on the countless miles of magnetic tape and the thousands of photographs we are carrying back to Earth. Other scientists can interpret them as easily as I can—more easily, in all probability. I am not one who would condone that tampering with the Truth which often gave my Order a bad name in the olden days.

The crew is already sufficiently depressed, I wonder how they will take this ultimate irony. Few of them have any religious faith, yet they will not relish using this final weapon in their campaign against me—that private, good-natured but fundamentally serious war which lasted all the way from Earth. It amused them to have a Jesuit as chief astrophysicist: Dr. Chandler, for instance, could never get over it (why are medical men such notorious atheists?). Sometimes he would meet me on the observation deck, where the lights are always low so that the stars shine with undiminished glory. He would come up to me in the gloom and stand staring out of the great oval port, while the heavens crawled slowly round us as the ship turned end over end with the residual spin we had never bothered to correct.

"Well, Father," he would say at last. "It goes on forever and forever, and perhaps *Something* made it. But how you can believe that Something has a special interest in us and our miserable little world—that just beats me." Then the argument would start, while the stars and nebulae would swing around us in silent, endless arcs beyond the flawlessly clear plastic of the observation port.

It was, I think, the apparent incongruity of my position which . . . yes, *amused* . . . the crew. In vain I would

point to my three papers in the *Astrophysical Journal*, my five in the *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*. I would remind them that our Order has long been famous for its scientific works. We may be few now, but ever since the eighteenth century we have made contributions to astronomy and geophysics out of all proportions to our numbers.

Will my report on the Phoenix Nebula end our thousand years of history? It will end, I fear, much more than that.

I do not know who gave the Nebula its name, which seems to me a very bad one. If it contains a prophecy, it is one which cannot be verified for several thousand million years. Even the word nebula is misleading: this is a far smaller object than those stupendous clouds of mist—the stuff of unborn stars—which are scattered throughout the length of the Milky Way. On the cosmic scale, indeed, the Phoenix Nebula is a tiny thing—a tenuous shell of gas surrounding a single star.

Or what is left of a star . . .

THE RUBENS engraving of Loyala seems to mock me as it hangs there above the spectrophotometer tracings. What would *you*, Father, have made of this knowledge that has come into my keeping, so far from the little world that was all the universe you knew? Would your faith have risen to the challenge, as mine has failed to do?

You gaze into the distance, Father, but I have traveled a distance beyond any that you could have imagined when you founded our Order a thousand years ago. No other survey ship has been so far from Earth: we are at the very frontiers of the explored universe. We set out to reach the Phoenix Nebula, we succeeded, and we are homeward bound with our burden of knowledge. I wish I could lift that burden from my shoulders, but I call to you in vain across the centuries and the light-years that lie between us.

On the book you are holding the words are plain to read. AD MAIOREM DEI GLORIAM the message runs, but it is a message I can no longer believe. Would you still believe it, if you could see what we have found?

We knew, of course, what the Phoenix Nebula was. Every year, in *our* galaxy alone, more than a hundred stars explode, blazing for a

few hours or days with thousands of times their normal brilliance before they sink back into death and obscurity. Such are the ordinary novae—the commonplace disasters of the universe. I have recorded the spectrograms and light-curves of dozens, since I started working at the lunar observatory.

But three or four times in every thousand years occurs something beside which even a nova pales into total insignificance.

When a star becomes a *supernova,* it may for a little while outshine all the massed suns of the galaxy. The Chinese astronomers watched this happen in 1054 A.D., not knowing what it was they saw. Five centuries later, in 1572, a supernova blazed in Cassiopeia so brilliantly that it was visible in the daylight sky. There have been three more in the thousand years that have passed since then.

Our mission was to visit the remnants of such a catastrophe, to reconstruct the events that led up to it, and, if possible, to learn its cause. We came slowly in through the concentric shells of gas that had been blasted out six thousand years before, yet were expanding still. They were immensely hot, radiating still with a fierce violet light, but far too tenuous to do us any damage. When the star had exploded, its outer layers had been driven upwards with such speed that they had escaped completely from its gravitational field. Now they formed a hollow shell large enough to engulf a thousand solar systems, and at its center burned the tiny, fantastic object which the star had now become—a white dwarf, smaller than the Earth yet weighing a million times as much.

The glowing gas shells were all around us, banishing the normal night of interstellar space. We were flying into the center of a cosmic bomb that had detonated millenia ago and whose incandescent fragments were still hurtling apart. The immense scale of the explosion, and the fact that the debris already covered a volume of space many billions of miles across, robbed the scene of any visible movement. It would take decades before the unaided eye could detect any motion in these tortured wisps and eddies of gas, yet the sense of turbulent expansion was overwhelming.

WE HAD CHECKED our primary drive hours before,

and were drifting slowly towards the fierce little star ahead. Once it had been a sun like our own, but it had squandered in a few hours the energy that should have kept it shining for a million years. Now it was a shrunken miser, hoarding its resources as if trying to make amends for its prodigal youth.

No one seriously expected to find planets. If there had been any before the explosion, they would have been boiled into puffs of vapor, and their substance lost in the greater wreckage of the star itself. But we made the automatic search, as always when approaching an unknown sun, and presently we found a single small world circling the star at an immense distance. It must have been the Pluto of this vanished solar system, orbiting on the frontiers of the night. Too far from the central sun ever to have known life, its remoteness had saved it from the fate of all its lost companions.

The passing fires had seared its rocks and burnt away the mantle of frozen gas that must have covered it in the days before the disaster. We landed, and we found the Vault.

Its builders had made sure that we should. The monolithic marker that stood above the entrance was now a fused stump, but even the first long-range photographs told us that here was the work of intelligence. A little later we detected the continent-wide pattern of radioactivity that had been buried in the rock. Even if the pylon above the Vault had been destroyed, this would have remained, an immovable and all but eternal beacon calling to the stars. Our ship fell towards this gigantic bull's-eye like an arrow into its target.

The pylon must have been a mile high when it was built, but now it looked like a candle that had melted down into a puddle of wax. It took us a week to drill through the fused rock, since we did not have the proper tools for a task like this. We were astronomers, not archaeologists, but we could improvise. Our original program was forgotten: this lonely monument, reared at such labor at the greatest possible distance from the doomed sun, could have only one meaning. A civilization which knew it was about to die had made its last bid for immortality.

It will take us generations to examine all the treasures that were placed in the Vault. *They* had plenty of time to

prepare, for their sun must have given its first warnings many years before the final detonation. Everything that they wished to preserve, all the fruits of their genius, they brought here to this distant world in the days before the end, hoping that some other race would find them and that they would not be utterly forgotten.

If only they had had a little more time! They could travel freely enough between the planets of their own sun, but they had not yet learned to cross the interstellar gulfs, and the nearest solar system was a hundred light-years away.

EVEN IF they had not been so disturbingly human as their sculpture shows, we could not have helped admiring them and grieving for their fate. They left thousands of visual records and the machines for projecting them, together with elaborate pictorial instructions from which it will not be difficult to learn their written language. We have examined many of these records, and brought to life for the first time in six thousand years the warmth and beauty of a civilization which in many ways must have been superior to our own. Perhaps they only showed us the best, and one can hardly blame them. But their worlds were very lovely, and their cities were built with a grace that matches anything of ours. We have watched them at work and play, and listened to their musical speech sounding across the centuries. One scene is still before my eyes—a group of children on a beach of strange blue sand, playing in the waves as children play on Earth.

And sinking into the sea, still warm and friendly and life-giving, is the sun that will soon turn traitor and obliterate all this innocent happiness.

Perhaps if we had not been so far from home and so vulnerable to loneliness, we should not have been so deeply moved. Many of us had seen the ruins of ancient civilizations on other worlds, but they had never affected us so profoundly.

This tragedy was unique. It was one thing for a race to fail and die, as nations and cultures have done on Earth. But to be destroyed so completely in the full flower of its achievement, leaving no survivors—how could that be reconciled with the mercy of God?

My colleagues have asked me that, and I have given

what answers I can. Perhaps you could have done better, Father Loyala, but I have found nothing in the *Exercitia Spiritualia* that helps me here. They were not an evil people: I do not know what gods they worshipped, if indeed they worshipped any. But I have looked back at them across the centuries, and have watched while the loveliness they used their last strength to preserve was brought forth again into the light of their shrunken sun.

I know the answers that my colleagues will give when they get back to Earth. They will say that the universe has no purpose and no plan, that since a hundred suns explode every year in our galaxy, at this very moment some race is dying in the depths of space. Whether that race has done good or evil during its lifetime will make no difference in the end: there is no divine justice, *for there is no God.*

Yet, of course, what we have seen proves nothing of the sort. Anyone who argues thus is being swayed by emotion, not logic. God has no need to justify His actions to man. He who built the universe can destroy it when He chooses. It is arrogance—it is perilously near blasphemy—for us to say what He may or may not do.

This I could have accepted, hard though it is to look upon whole worlds and peoples thrown into the furnace. But there comes a point when even the deepest faith must falter, and now, as I look at my calculations, I know I have reached that point at last.

WE COULD NOT TELL, before we reached the nebula, how long ago the explosion took place. Now, from the astronomical evidence and the record in the rocks of that one surviving planet, I have been able to date it very exactly. I know in what year the light of this colossal conflagration reached Earth. I know how brilliantly the supernova whose corpse now dwindles behind our speeding ship once shone in terrestrial skies. I know how it must have blazed low in the East before sunrise, like a beacon in that Oriental dawn.

There can be no reasonable doubt: the ancient mystery is solved at last. Yet—O God, there were so many stars you *could* have used.

What was the need to give these people to the fire, that the symbol of their passing might shine above Bethlehem?

∞ ∞ ∞

Infinity's Choice

By DAMON KNIGHT

In each issue, Mr. Knight will review a new book which he considers outstanding enough to rate special consideration.

SOLAR LOTTERY, by Philip K. Dick. An Ace Double Novel Book (with Leigh Brackett's "The Big Jump"); 35c.

Philip K. Dick is that short-story writer who for the past five years has kept popping up all over—in one year, 1953, he published 27 stories—with a sort of unobtrusive and chameleonlike competence. Entering and leaving as he does by so many doors at once, he creates a blurred impression of pleasant, small literary gifts.

The surprise of a book like "Solar Lottery" from such an author is more than considerable. Roughly, it's as if Robert Sheckley should abruptly turn into a combination of Alfred Bester, Henry and Catherine Kuttner, and A. E. van Vogt.

This book is remarkable, to begin with, in the way its extrapolations have been handled. Dick writes of a future world in which the radio-and-tv quiz has evolved into a system-wide game with all power as its stake: the tyrant, the Quizmaster, is chosen by a random twitch of the bottle that contains an equivalent of everybody's "power card." In theory, therefore, anybody might rise to the top, at any time. In practice, most people are "unks" — unclassified — and have no p-cards; of those who have, most surrender them to the bosses of the Hills, the great industrial complexes, under medieval fealty arrangements. The masses of the people, without any cause-and-effect principle to sustain them, have fallen back on "Minimax"—the Theory of Games made into a nihilist philosophy.

In a science-fiction magazine serial, this framework would be crudely exposed and bunged into the reader's eye at every opportunity: the lead character would have long solemn thoughts about "how wonderful the System is—or is it?"—and we would all

grow so tired of waiting for the boob to make up his mind that any distraction would be welcome.

Nothing of the sort happens here; Dick states his premises, gives you enough of a look at his crowded, complex world to let you find your bearings—and then puts away his maps and charts for good. You are in the world of the bottle and the Quizmaster, the Hills and the legal assassins, and you see the living surface of it, not the bones.

This is not the end of the wonder. There's the tension: Dick has caught and intensified the bare-nerve tautness of our own society at its worst, and put it on paper here so you can see, hear, feel and smell it.

There's the plot—like van Vogt miraculously making sense as he goes along: each new development not merely startling—anybody can startle—but startling *and logically necessary*. This is architectural plotting, a rare and inhumanly difficult thing; and who in blazes ever expected Dick to turn up as one of the few masters of it?

And the characters: Verrick, the deposed Quizmaster, whose single-minded aim to assassinate his successor gives this story its tremendous drive; Eleanor Stevens, the telepathic secretary who renounces her gift to stay with Verrick; Pellig the golem-assassin, and more. These people are real; they carry conviction. Not the least of Dick's virtues is that he shows the shock to the human nervous system of violent events; he fobs you off with no icy supermen.

Some of the small excesses and awkwardnesses of this book are perhaps traceable to the same cause. The bare-breastedness of all the women in Dick's world is hard to account for on climatic, social, moral, esthetic or other grounds, except as a simple reaction of the author's against magazine prudery. And the burning of surplus goods and the use of medieval charms seem to me errors in dialectics.

Yet even in the summing-up, that place where the author has got to try to say what his novel means and where he thinks it leads, never quite satisfactorily — because all novels with any life in them end too soon—Dick acquits himself wonderfully well.

Cartwright, the new Quizmaster, is explaining how he gimmicked the bottle—making the whole M-Game system meaningless—in order to get

himself selected as the tyrant:

"Was that ethical?" Bentley asked. "That kicks over the board, doesn't it?"

"I played the game for years," Cartwright said. "Most people go on playing the game all their lives. Then I began to realize the rules were set up so I could not win. Who wants to play that kind of game? We're betting against the house, and the house always wins."

Unanswerable. . . . And then you realize, while that speech resonates in your mind, that it isn't only the imaginary society of "Solar Lottery" that Cartwright is condemning: it's all societies—including our own.

∞ ∞ ∞

King of the Hill

Continued from page 67

tape. In that order, the sequence couldn't be reversed afterwards.

But the sound of the programmer's journal clicking to "Off" was as loud in that cabin as any gunshot.

"HE'LL BE all right," I told Joan afterwards. "He pulled himself through. I wouldn't have dared to throw it at any other man that fast—but he's got guts."

"Just the same," Joan said, "they'd better start rotating the station captains faster. The next man may not be so tough—and what if *he's* a sleepwalker?"

I didn't say anything. I'd had my share of worries for that week.

"You did a whale of a job yourself, Peter," Joan said. "I just wish we could bank it in the machine. We might need the data later."

"Well, why can't we?"

"The Joint Chiefs of Staff say no. They don't say why. But they don't want any part of it recorded in ULTIMAC—or anywhere else."

I stared at her. At first it didn't seem to make sense. And then it did—and that was worse.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Joan—does that mean what I think it means? Is 'Spatial Supremacy' just as bankrupt as 'Massive Retaliation' was? Is it possible that the satellite—and the bombs. . . . Is it possible that I was telling Gascoigne the truth about the bombs being duds?"

Joan shrugged.

"He that darkeneth counsel without wisdom," she said, "isn't earning his salary." ∞

continued from BACK COVER

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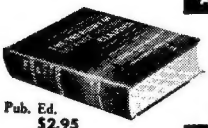

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